ISSUE 416
EMPIRE JULY 2023

OPPENHEIMER: A DAY AT NOLAN'S HQ

JULY 2023

EMPIRE+

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE - DEAD RECKONING

TOM CRUISE TALKS HIS CLIFF-JUMPING, TRAIN-SURFING ACTION EPIC

GAL GADOT

ON GENRE-BUSTING SPY THRILLER HEART OF STONE

BLACK MIRROR

CHARLIE BROOKER'S NEW NIGHTMARES

BLUE BEETLE

THE LATINO SUPERHERO IS HERE

STAR WARS WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

AHSOKA

'SABERS UP! AS THE ICONIC WARRIOR FINALLY TAKES CENTRE-STAGE, ROSARIO DAWSON AND HER REBEL CREW REVEAL HOW THEY'RE TRANSFORMING THE GALAXY

PLUS! INSIDE LAIKA'S STOP-MOTION KINGDOM

AHSOKA • OPPENHEIMER • MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE – DEAD RECKONING PART ONE • GAL GADOT • BLACK MIRROR

"Not witch. Warrior. I could tear you to pieces before you blink."

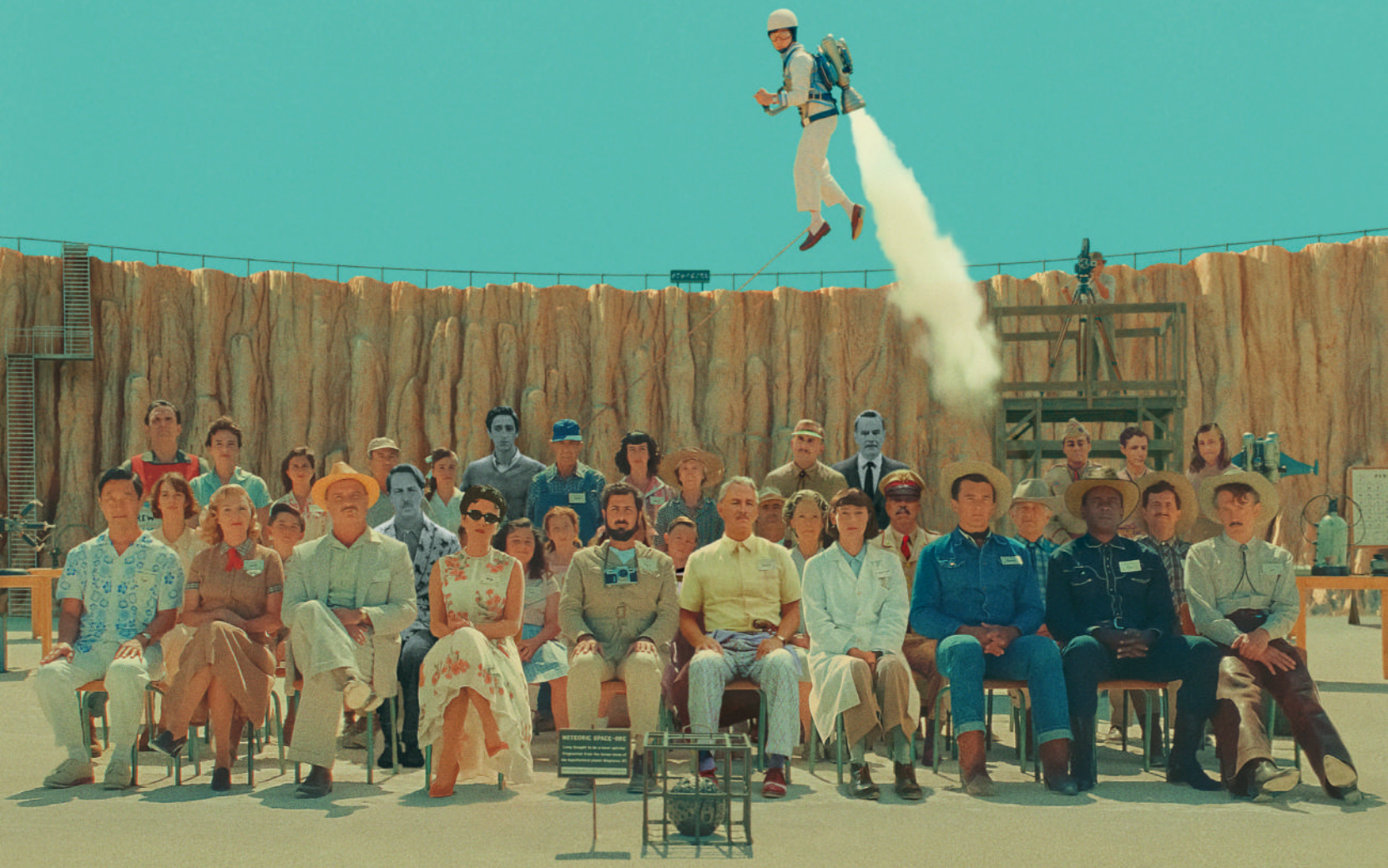
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UNIVERSAL

THIS MONTH I found myself in a staring contest with an owl. (Spoiler: I lost.) It's not every issue this happens, but then again, it's not every issue you get to go to Portland, Oregon, for a visit to the stop-motion magic factory that is Laika. Portland itself may have been a bit of a let-down, in that I didn't encounter a single Carrie Brownstein or Fred Armisen (if you haven't watched *Portlandia*, do so immediately), but there was nothing disappointing about the place behind the likes of *Coraline*, *Kubo And The Two Strings* and the upcoming *Wildwood,* the movie that will feature said bird. It was a total treat to get a glimpse of their new animated epic coming together (though the box of tiny puppet eyeballs might haunt me for a while). Head to page 66 for our report.

Wildwood isn't out until 2025 (there's no rushing a puppet owl), but this issue also dives deep into more imminent excitement. To talk *Oppenheimer*, Alex Godfrey headed to Christopher Nolan's LA HQ (disappointingly not a Batcave, though it might well have been a dream within a dream) for a sit-down with the iconic filmmaker. Chris Hewitt spent an hour with Tom Cruise for our epic rundown of the new *Mission: Impossible*. Ellen E Jones lobbed some existential questions at Charlie Brooker ahead of the new batch of *Black Mirror* nightmares.

And for our stupendous cover story, Amon Warmann chatted to Rosario Dawson and more to find out why Ahsoka, the kinda-Jedi who's already blazed bright in animated form, is about to set the live-action *Star Wars* world on fire. The show will also feature a very cute Loth-cat; wonder if I could beat it in a staring contest?

Enjoy the issue.



NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen

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This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Greg Ruth

TURN TO PAGE 8 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE MEMBERSHIP

Chris Lupton, John Nugent, Greg Ruth, Marco Vittur

EMPIRE

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO THIS MONTH

HUNG OUT WITH TEAM LAIKA IN PORTLAND



In early April, we paid a visit to stop-motion animation heroes Laika at their Portland, Oregon HQ. Here, photographer Shayan Asgharnia snaps head honcho Travis Knight; read the full, lovingly crafted feature on page 66.

CHATTED TO CATE BLANCHETT IN CANNES



Last month, *Empire*'s John Nugent attended the Cannes Film Festival, and had a chat with Cate Blanchett and director Warwick Thornton, star and director of new drama *The New Boy*. See if it merits *un certain regard* on page 23.

CREATED A SUBSCRIBER-EXCLUSIVE *AHSOKA* COVER



Our beautiful subscriber cover, from artist and illustrator Greg Ruth, combines *Star Wars* hero Ahsoka with the silhouette of dastardly villain Admiral Thrawn. Subscribe to get bespoke covers like this in the future.

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66 LAIKA
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Charlie Brooker tells us all about the return of the TV show that will most likely leave you so terrified of technology, you might throw out every electronic item you have in your house. This Contents page was written on a blackboard.

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Christopher Nolan and Cillian Murphy reunite for their new movie, an intense epic about the man who created the atomic bomb. Peaky blinding.

88 THE DEEP DIVE
The incredible story of the first-ever Academy Awards, which took place all the way back in 1929. The more things change (it ran for just 15 minutes), the more things stay the same (Meryl Streep won Best Actress).

Above: Rosario Dawson and Mary Elizabeth Winstead in *Ahsoka*. **Below:** See if you think *Pretty Woman*'s position on The Ranking is a big mistake. Big. Huge.



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Spine lines issue 415: Newsstand: "It's the invasion! I'm telling you! It's the invasion! I told you!" is from *Eight Legged Freaks*. Subs: "Tomorrow's invasion is a slaughter. I'm dead within five minutes of landing" is from *Edge Of Tomorrow*.

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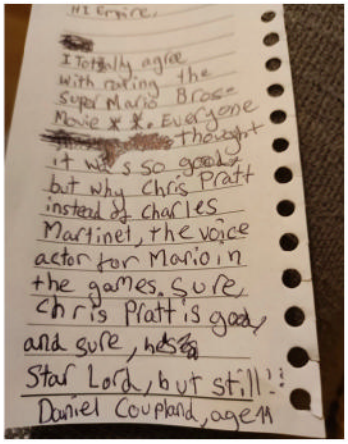
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TALK TO US

COMMENT OF THE MONTH



NOT SO SUPER MARIO

I have been reading your magazines for over a decade now and about a year ago my son started reading them too. I have just received issue 415 and my son predictably dove right in before I got a look-in. He obviously hasn't seen many of the films given the age ratings but has very strong feelings about those he had... Please see attached letter that he asked me to post for him.

CAROL COUPLAND, VIA EMAIL

Thank you, Carol, and please can you tell young Daniel that, with his sharp turn of phrase and fierce opinions about movies, he has a future in film journalism. Have a Picturehouse membership on us — for you to both, hopefully, enjoy better films in the future.

Picturehouse *Empire*'s star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas acoss the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. And until 31 December 2023, enjoy the extra perks of free entry for up to two curated films every week, plus free tea and filter coffee weekdays before 5pm! When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.

LAST OF THE SUMMER 'WHY'?

The latest subscriber issue slides out of the envelope with the usual anticipation and delight, knowing I've got my movie mag to read and absorb. Hold on, though, what's this enigmatic word nestled above the M on my front cover: Summer? A quick flick through *Empire* back issues and nope, there's only the traditional calendar dates on the covers. What could it mean? Are we, heaven forbid, going quarterly? This mystery requires a full investigation. Call Holmes, Jones, Blanc, Gunderson or Starling; we need answers.

MARK GRIERSON, VIA EMAIL

Elementary, my dear Mark. Fear not, we are not going quarterly, and we have not decided to rewrite the Gregorian calendar in our own image: quite simply, a little while back we switched from 12 issues a year to 13. Think of the Summer issue as a sun-dappled bonus.

HAVE JUST GOT MY SUBSCRIPTION TO @EMPIREMAGAZINE'S #SPOILERSPECIALS ... THIS IS A BEAUTIFUL MOMENT.

@ANICHEKEI

ON THE *STILL: A MICHAEL J. FOX MOVIE* TRAILER: ANYONE ELSE SHED A LITTLE TEAR AT THE TRAILER? I DID. MICHAEL AND *BACK TO THE FUTURE* ARE MY REASON FOR BEING ALIVE.

ANDREW MILLER

NOT SHOTS

I read with amusement your 'Kill List' during the feature on *Sisu* [sidebar, issue #415]. Surely you have overlooked the biggest single film body-count in all of cinema... *Hot Shots! Part Deux*, with a confirmed on-screen kill count of at least 289. Topper and Tug are currently on their way over to your office to add to this overlooked kill count.

NICK GURNEY, VIA EMAIL

A regrettable omission. Empire *is a longtime vocal advocate of the many virtues of* Hot Shots! Part Deux. *We will have to settle this, as Tug once put it, the old-fashioned way: first guy to die loses!*

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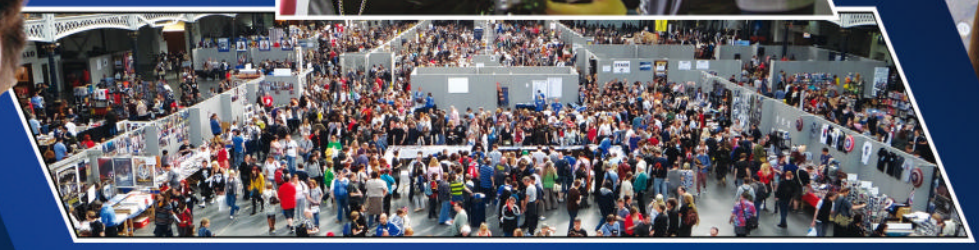
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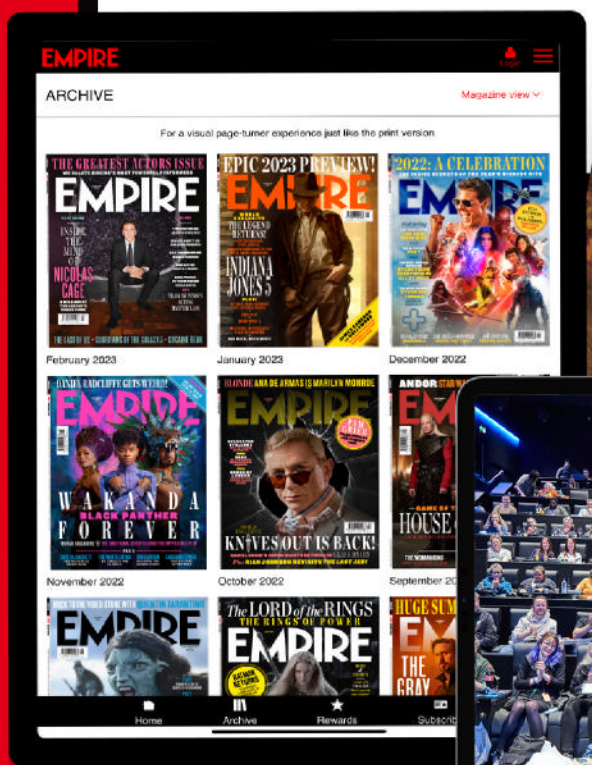
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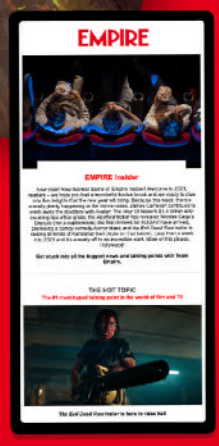












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TAKE 5

THIS MONTH'S ESSENTIAL FILM AND TV NEWS [EDITED BY BETH WEBB]



No./ 1

Inside the writers' resistance

As the writers' strike shuts down Hollywood, *Empire* heads to the picket lines to find out what they're fighting for ILLUSTRATION **BARBARA GIBSON**



AT 12:01AM ON 2 MAY, a sound rang out across Hollywood: the thud of 11,000 film and TV writers slamming their laptops shut in unison, refusing to work until studios and streaming platforms agree to more favourable working conditions.

"It's about extinction. It's about survival," *Hunger Games* screenwriter Billy Ray tells *Empire*, three weeks into a strike that has shut down movies and shows such as *Blade* and *Stranger Things*, and brought into question the release dates of many of next year's most anticipated series and blockbusters. Not since the last writers' strike in 2007 — which lasted 100 days and threw everything from *Quantum Of Solace* to *Lost* into havoc — has Hollywood found itself embroiled in a civil war as disruptive or bitter.

In Los Angeles on 4 May, *Empire* went down to a picket line outside one of Netflix's studios, where dozens of writers marched and chanted. The mood was friendly but fiery — righteous indignation was in the air. Spotting Mae Martin, creator of British romcom drama series *Feel Good*, we discuss the urgency. "I'm in the middle of a writers' room for my next show, we were just in the zone, and then this happens," says Martin. "It's my first strike. But it feels so necessary."

This is happening all over town. For the screenwriters protesting, the action feels like a last resort. "You don't think I'd rather be writing *M3GAN 2* right now?" says Akela Cooper, who penned the horror hit and warns of an "existential threat" to the quality of film and TV if the Writers Guild of America (WGA) doesn't succeed in negotiations with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

Money, of course, is a major element in the fight. "There are successful television writers who are on food stamps and have second jobs to cover their rent," says *The OA* writer Claire Kiechel, explaining how in the last decade, the average weekly pay of working screenwriters has declined by 23 per cent according to a WGA study, in part due to the advent of streaming services squeezing costs across the industry. Another writer, speaking to *Empire* on the condition of anonymity, currently works as an Uber driver on weekends and evenings despite writing credits on an award-winning show for a major streaming platform. "People assume that once you've reached the mountaintop in Hollywood as a screenwriter that you must live in a mansion," they say. "But it turns out the mountaintop is a pretty fucking barren place." ›



Damon Lindelof (*Lost*, *The Leftovers*, *Watchmen*) tells *Empire* he finds the record profits still being made by streaming companies sickening. "We're in a symbiotic relationship with these corporations. But the fundamental reality is that, as their profits go up, we're making less and less."

More than money, though, says Lindelof, the strike is about "protecting the quality of TV shows and movies we love". He points out how one of the WGA's demands is a limit to how studios use artificial intelligence in the writing process on movies as that technology advances. "A decade from now, if the studios have their way, AI will be iterating scripts that one writer then puts a bit of a polish on," he says. "That's the doomsday scenario, because [it'll leave] television and movies completely anaesthetised."

Cooper agrees. *M3GAN* might be one of the defining movies about AI of the last year, but AI could never have written it, she insists. "One of the best picket signs that I've seen thus far in the strike said: 'AI doesn't have childhood trauma!' Not everyone needs childhood trauma to tell a good story. But you do need human experiences, otherwise where's your emotional heart of a movie? What are people relating to?"

The knock-on effect of writers being replaced with AI would be disastrous, says Ray, risking the cultural relevance of the entire industry. "AI will generate shitty scripts, the quality of storytelling will drop and audiences will move on to TikTok, YouTube or whatever the equivalent at that moment is. Because movies just won't be as good," he predicts. In this scenario, film and TV will no longer be the dominant form of cultural entertainment, replaced by "someone on TikTok doing a cartwheel while their feet are on fire. Who needs *Succession* when you have that, right?" he laughs. "If writers don't survive, the business won't survive. And then everyone's fucked."



Above: Auditions for Season 2 of *The Last Of Us* have been put on hold. **Right:** Christopher and Jonathan Nolan on the picket line at Paramount.

How long could this strike rumble on for? Some are speculating it might last even longer than the 2007 shutdown, because of an alleged refusal to negotiate by the AMPTP. The WGA's request for restrictions on the use of AI, for example, was met with an offer of "annual meetings to discuss advancements in technology". Other requests were rejected outright.

There is hope, though. "One difference this time [compared to 2007] is that we have more support from the other unions. Hopefully that speeds it up," Mae Martin tells *Empire*, pointing to the large number of actors and directors who've thrown their support behind the strike. Christopher and Jonathan Nolan showed up; Larry David even sent a truck serving bagels to protesting writers outside the Warner Bros. lot.

This disruption could be just the beginning. On 18 May, it was announced that the Screen Actors Guild will vote on whether they also go on strike over similar alleged mistreatment and unfair working conditions. Kiechel appreciates that viewers are worried about what all of this

Alamy, Getty Images, Alex Godfrey, Twitter



Top to bottom: Writer and comedian Mae Martin; *Stranger Things* and *Andor* are both affected by the strike; Talk-show host Seth Meyers joined protesters.







means for their favourite shows and movies, and says that writers are desperate to get back to crafting the stories they (and audiences) love. Until they can do so "in a way that's sustainable", though, they're committed to finding new methods of applying pressure on studios to find a solution. "We are 11,000 incredibly creative [people] who now have nothing to do but figure out the best way to show the studios exactly what creativity we have," she says. "We feel empowered. We feel emboldened. They haven't seen anything yet." **AL HORNER**



No./2 The Taika to-do list

The prolific director has more chores than Cinderella

MAKE *KLARA AND THE SUN*

Taika Waititi has just signed on to direct Kazuo Ishiguro's Nobel Prize-winning story about an artificially intelligent companion, raising questions as to when exactly he'll find the time. Here's hoping Klara has her fighting face on, because she's got some serious competition for the filmmaker's attention.

GET *TIME BANDITS* IN THE BAG

Filming of Waititi's Apple TV+ series kicked off last October, although there's been few updates since, bar a rumour that Terry Gillam, director of the original film, walked off the set. If Waititi turns into a hermit crab, we know why.

FINISH THAT *STAR WARS* SCRIPT

"He won't get mad at me for saying this; he's just slow," Kathleen Kennedy told *Empire* at Star Wars Celebration before confirming that the often "distracted" filmmaker Waititi owes her the third act of his upcoming galaxy-set adventure. With Waititi rumoured to start shooting the highly secretive Lucasfilm feature next year, he'd better get his Gungans in a row quickly.

REVIVE *AKIRA*

Waititi has been linked to a live-action adaptation of this groundbreaking manga series since 2017. Yet the filmmaker further delayed the long-gestating project, which was first announced in 2002, by taking a *Thor* detour. Now the Asgardian dust has settled, Waititi can rev the engine back up on this Neo-Tokyo-set biker movie.

BITE DOWN ON *WE'RE WOLVES*

The fate of this long-gestating *What We Do In The Shadows* spin-off is less certain than a vampire surviving a sunrise. But until the New Zealand director announces it's off, there's still hope.

DUST OFF *FLASH GORDON*

A live-action adaptation of Waititi's childhood favourite has been percolating for at least seven years, according to producer John Davis. The script was confirmed to be underway back in 2021, but it's been all quiet on the Mingo front since then.

ACTIVATE *THE INCAL*

Someone sure has a thing for space operas! Waititi is down to adapt a film based on the pioneering French graphic-novel series. The intergalactic detective story is widely hailed as a visionary masterpiece, but as Waititi is in the process of proving with *Akira*, he's not afraid of ambitious adaptations.

UNLEASH THE OOMPA-LOOMPAS

Oompa-Loompa doom-pa-dee-doo, here's something else Taika's got on too. His animated origin story about Willy Wonka's orange employees isn't the only Dahl adaptation he's helming, with another *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory* animated series incoming. Both shows will be the stuff of pure imagination until Waititi checks them off his never-ending list. **BETH WEBB**



No./3

Move over, Ant-Man. Blue Beetle is here

XOLO MARIDUEÑA on how his Latino superhero is changing the game

AT A FANCY dinner in August 2021, director Angel Manuel Soto surprised Xolo Maridueña with two questions: "Do you like steak?" and "Do you want to be Blue Beetle?" The following night, at the premiere for James Gunn's *The Suicide Squad*, the *Cobra Kai* breakout star walked the red carpet as the first ever Latino actor to lead a standalone superhero movie. "It was like an Ashton Kutcher-style *Punk'd* prank," Maridueña tells *Empire* about his whirlwind 24 hours. "I was really taken off guard, but I'm so glad it happened that way."

In the DC movie, Maridueña plays Jaime Reyes, a Mexican teen whose life is overturned when a mechanical alien scarab chooses him as its symbiotic host. A blue exoskeleton suit, a big crazy monster threatening to take over the planet, and a scarab-seeking nemesis in the form of Susan Sarandon ensue. The significance of taking up a leading role that would mean so much to so many wasn't lost on Maridueña. "The goal was to create a movie for a young me and a young Angel that said, 'Hey, man, someone who looks like you or comes from a similar background can be a superhero,'" he says. "The second thing was to open more doors for people like us."

The similarity between Maridueña and his character isn't just skin-deep. He may not have faced off against a villainous Sarandon (on the contrary, the pair are seeing *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* musical together when he's next in New York), but the actor — who comes from Mexican, Cuban and Ecuadorian descent — says that he knows how to play a person who, in spite of hailing from a hard-grafting family, struggles to get ahead in a world built for Bruce Waynes. "As fun as it is to get into this superhero world where everything is [dialled up to] 110 per cent, the conflict and the narrative that these characters are going through is something that I've related to," he explains.

Jaime at least gets his own answer to Gotham, with the film set in the fictional Palmera City. Maridueña explains how Soto and writer Gareth Dunnet-Alcocer cooked up a setting that had the heartbeat of their favourite Latino cities. "It sounds like Miami and it has the smells of Barcelona and the sense of community is something like the Boyle Heights here in Los Angeles," he says. "We wanted to create a city that has all of those different beats and colours and really kind of make a place for me to feel at home."

Blue Beetle began development well before James Gunn and Peter Safran's seismic DC shake-up, but Maridueña hopes that there's life for his history-making superhero beyond his debut. "If we get one movie or a trilogy and fucking fold this into the *Justice League* shit, we're ready for the whole nine," he laughs. "For me and Angel and the team, we kicked ass with this movie, but it just depends on numbers." Of course, Maridueña didn't come here to predict the future of DC. He just came to eat steak and play Blue Beetle. And he's fresh out of steak. **BETH WEBB**





Clockwise from main: The big blue (beetle): Xolo Maridueña; You've got to hand it to him: Maridueña as Jaime Reyes; The DC hero goes stratospheric.

BLUE BEETLE **IS IN CINEMAS FROM 18 AUGUST**

Alamy, Capital Pictures, Getty Images

No./4 NEXT IN THE SERIES



You fell in love with that incredible new TV show. And then it ended! Don't despair — Boyd Hilton recommends the sibling shows to watch next

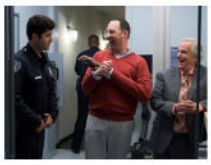
IF YOU LOVED... BARRY



CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM

(SKY ATLANTIC/NOW)

Barry co-creators Alec Berg and Bill Hader have made some incredible contributions to Larry David's comedy masterpiece *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Berg exec-produced and directed myriad classic episodes, including Season 7's 'The Hero' featuring Ricky Gervais, while Hader pulled off one of his greatest turns in Season 11, Episode 9, as three identical Eastern European business owners called Igor, Gregor and Timor who deny they even know each other, much to Larry's confusion and mounting fury when he encounters them one after the other. Hader was Emmy-nominated for this gloriously eccentric guest (triple-)role.



ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

(NETFLIX)

Before *Barry* sealed *Happy Days* legend Henry Winkler's reputation as one of the coolest comedy actors in US TV history, the former Fonz showed his talent for portraying self-absorbed, eccentric oddballs as lawyer Barry Zuckerkorn in *Arrested Development*. The attorney for the Bluth family, Zuckerkorn was perpetually badly prepared and distracted, and by Season 3 he'd made a radical career change to became a sex worker. Definitely one of the edgiest roles in Winkler's extraordinary career.



MR INBETWEEN

(DISNEY+)

You wait ages for a stylish dark comedy series about the daily life of a professional assassin, and then two come along (almost) at once. In 2018, the arrival of *Barry* on HBO was swiftly followed a matter of months later by *Mr Inbetween* on the FX channel. This Australian show, created by and starring Scott Ryan as the hitman known as The Magician, mixes the killer's ruthless kills with his domestic dramas, as he tries to be a decent father and partner while looking after his terminally ill brother. It's very nearly as funny and enthralling as *Barry*.



HINDSIGHT

(AMAZON FREEVEE)

Sarah Goldberg, who plays actor Sally Reed in *Barry*, got her first big TV acting break in this one-season wonder of a comedy-drama, which aired on VH1 in the US in 2015. Goldberg plays Lolly, the impulsive best friend of central character Becca (Laura Ramsey), who goes 20 years back in time to correct her mistakes. Accompanied by a relentless stream of classic '90s bangers, the series is built round the breezily authentic relationship between Lolly and Becca, and Goldberg is the best thing about the show.

***BARRY* IS AVAILABLE NOW ON SKY ATLANTIC/NOW**



No./5 THE BUMPY ROAD TO *BEETLEJUICE 2*

The sequel to the Tim Burton classic has had more twists than a giant sandworm

1990

Tim Burton hires *Mars Attacks!* screenwriter Jonathan Gems to pen 'Beetlejuice Goes Hawaiian', in which the Deetz family's plans to build a holiday resort are scuppered by an ancient burial ground. But Warner Bros. is desperate to let a Burton *Batman* sequel spread its wings, halting proceedings.

1996

Yet even after *Batman Returns*, the *Beetlejuice* follow-up lingers. Among those approached to spruce up the script is Kevin Smith, who turns it down. Finally in 1997, Gems calls time on the film: "Winona is too old for the role, and the only way they could make it would be to totally recast it."

2011

Warner Bros. hires *Dark Shadows* co-writer Seth Grahame-Smith for another bash, who likens the challenge to following up *Citizen Kane*. The story is set in the modern day with Michael Keaton back as Betelgeuse. Even with Winona Ryder hinting at her return, the film loses momentum and is again shelved in 2019.

2023

Turns out if you say "Beetlejuice sequel" three times, it appears! Keaton and Ryder confirm they're reprising their roles, with Jenna Ortega as Ryder's daughter and Monica Belluci reportedly playing the mischievous miscreant's missus. Let's turn on the juice and see what shakes loose. **BETH WEBB**

***BEETLEJUICE 2* IS IN CINEMAS IN SEPTEMBER 2024**

TRAILER TALK

Killers Of The Flower Moon

Unfiltered, uncensored, uncompromising trailer reactions from team EMPIRE













Ben Travis (Deputy Online Editor): I'm going to put my neck on the line and say that I'm excited for this. He's quite good, isn't he, Martin Scorsese?

Joanna Moran (Photography Director): I can see a future for him.

James Dyer (Digital Editor-In-Chief): It gives me pause, if only because it looks really intense. It feels like it's going to be very emotionally punishing.

Beth Webb (News Editor): Well, yes, it's about the Osage people being killed off mysteriously in the 1920s. I imagine it's going to be pretty full-on.

Sophie Butcher (Social Media Editor): I feel like this one shot, with the oil and the dancing Indigenous locals, just sums up the whole film. It's so evocative from the get-go.

Beth: And yet we've got three-and-a-half glorious hours of this. It feels like he's harking back to *Silence* in this shot.

Alex Godfrey (Features Editor): I think it looks like 2023 Scorsese, with all his experience, wisdom, skill and worldview, but doing something that feels kind of traditional too. It feels like he's got nothing to prove anymore.

Joanna: Is it a protest movie? I'm just thinking of everything that's going on in America around Native Americans getting pushed out of history.

Ben: I feel like Scorsese often looks into the kind of dark heart of America and its different religions, whether that's Christianity, or capitalism, or crime. I'm really interested in this because it feels on the one hand quite fresh from him. The 1920s isn't a period of American history we've seen him play in before. But at the same time, it feels thematically like it really fits with a lot of his stuff.

Alex: Scorsese, De Niro and DiCaprio are very politically vocal people. None of them are shy when it comes to saying how they think the world is being run. And I think that's going to feed into this.

Ben: This film has the same cinematographer who worked on *Barbie*: Rodrigo Prieto. So the person who crafted these incredible shots is also behind the pinkest movie you've ever seen.

Alex: Is the whole movie in slow motion? Is that why it's three-and-a-half hours long?

Ben: He's doing a Zack Snyder.

Alex: Release the Scorsese cut.

Beth: It would be a month long.

Joanna: Leo's going back to his J. Edgar Hoover era here.

Alex: His character's related to De Niro's character in the film, so I imagine he's playing into that. He's got the De Niro grimace.

Ben: There's a very good Twitter thread by a former chief of the Osage people who spoke about how Scorsese went to great lengths to centre Indigenous people in this story. A lot of the rewriting shifted the story away from the FBI— then the Bureau of Investigation — towards them instead. Again, good on Scorsese: decades in and still showing us all how it should be done.

Sophie: I think that was the risk with this film. You don't want it to be centred on a white story, with the Bureau at the heart of it.

Beth: I am really excited to see this performance from Lily Gladstone.

Alex: It is amazing to see someone relatively unknown be thrown into a production like this and take co-lead alongside some of the biggest actors in the world.

Beth: And a non-male co-lead at that, which isn't something I've personally seen much of in Scorsese's films. Margot Robbie was high up the cast list on *The Wolf Of Wall Street* and she definitely represented a lot of things, but she didn't have a meaty storyline. It's good to see someone else get to do some proper narrative heavy lifting.

Ben: Somebody did joke that De Niro looks like Eugene Levy in this film.

Beth: I mean, if anyone bears any sort of resemblance to Eugene Levy, it's surely Scorsese.

Alex: But all joking aside, I just love that these two are still working together and still both making massive films together. They started doing this in the early '70s — we're talking 50 years of De Niro and Scorsese making films, and now making one of the most anticipated and biggest films of the year. It's awesome.

Sophie: I love this shot of the pair of them here.

Beth: It reminds me of that shot in *The Power Of The Dog* with Jesse Plemons — who is obviously also in this film — and Kristen Dunst.

James: Jesse Plemons wants to watch himself here because we're in the midst of another writers' strike. *Friday Night Lights* fans, of course, know that during the last strike, he killed a man. And he will kill again.

Beth: I should really check that show out.

KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON WILL BE IN CINEMAS FROM 20 OCTOBER AND ON APPLE TV+ LATER THIS YEAR



INTRODUCING...

Leo Abelo Perry

THE TEN-YEAR-OLD STAR OF *FAST X* (AND BUDDING ACTIVIST) ON HIS DIESEL-POWERED PERFORMANCE

ON GETTING INTO ACTING

So I'm watching a show one day on my iPad, and I'm like, "Mom, how do they shrink and get into my iPad?" She asked my uncles, who are actors. And then on my first movie [*Cheaper By The Dozen*], I'm like, "Oh, this makes so much more sense!"

ON DOING HIS OWN STUNTS

I think I did all my own stunts? But you don't actually jump between two cars, because that would actually be very dangerous and the physics don't make sense. You jump from pads into the car and they edit it together.

ON HIS ACTIVIST WORK

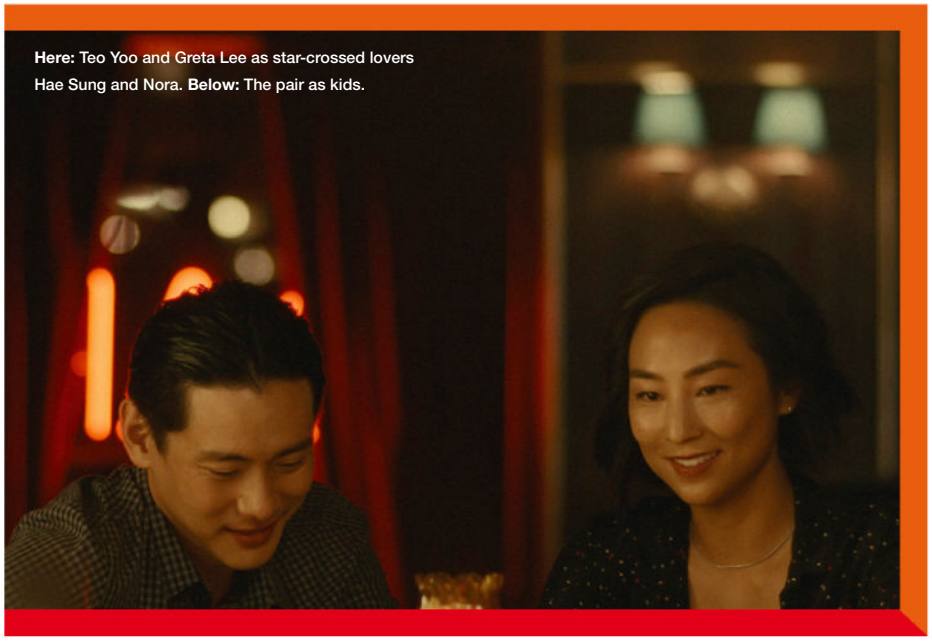
[The movement I created] was called Dance For Justice. Dancing was my favourite thing at that point [Perry started the movement in 2020], so I played music through my computer and danced [on the sidewalk], and I had two hats out to collect money for Black Lives Matter. I totally spelled it wrong because I was, like, seven. Mom saw me and started a GoFundMe, which got more than $8 in a hat in front of my sidewalk. The GoFundMe raised $20,000.

ON HIS FUTURE PLANS

I'm a big basketball person. But acting is always a good choice. I like acting, it's fun, and I enjoy it. So why not?

CHRIS HEWITT

FAST X IS OUT NOW



Here: Teo Yoo and Greta Lee as star-crossed lovers Hae Sung and Nora. **Below:** The pair as kids.

No./6 A New York love story with a fresh twist

***Past Lives*' filmmaker Celine Song on her devastating, decades-spanning romance**

A GREAT LOVE story is never without its challenges. And Celine Song's feature debut *Past Lives* comes with just about every challenge imaginable, from long distances to language barriers. The A24-backed drama, which made waves at the Sundance and Berlin film festivals, follows Nora (Greta Lee), a New York playwright who left her childhood beau Hae Sung (Teo Yoo) when she emigrated from Seoul with her family.

The film started from a personal place, with Song — a playwright herself — moving from Korea to Canada as a kid. "The part of writing the film that was scary was revisiting those things, because I didn't know the emotional or psychological place that it would take me to," she tells *Empire*. "But I also knew that I needed to be as honest and real as I could be with it."

Past Lives has three chapters, with 12 years between each. When Nora and Hae Sung reconnect in their twenties, it's over the sputtering internet connections of the 2010s. This clunky technology was vital to telling their story, so Song had the characters' rooms built as two custom sets, with its own internet cable running between their computers that could be tampered with on-command. "When [they] first see each other for the first time in 12 years, it feels like a miracle. It's like sci-fi," she explains. Yet what with this being a great love story and all, that miracle quickly becomes a limitation. "They start to feel frustrated, like, 'Why can't this reflect the level of intimacy that I feel for this person?'"

When Nora and Hae Sung finally meet up in New York in their thirties, Nora is happily married to Arthur (Joe Magaro). A soul-searching trip around the city ensues, with the pair stealing glances across boardwalks and bars. One destination on their tour is a major, if somewhat unexpected, landmark. "People wondered why I wanted to shoot at the Statue Of Liberty, because it's maybe too iconic, it's too New York," Song reflects. "But I say that it's a very meaningful and a very romantic place for an immigrant or tourist. To them, it's so special." It's not easy to create a fresh love story in a city as well-worn and well-documented as New York, but Song has found a way. **BETH WEBB**

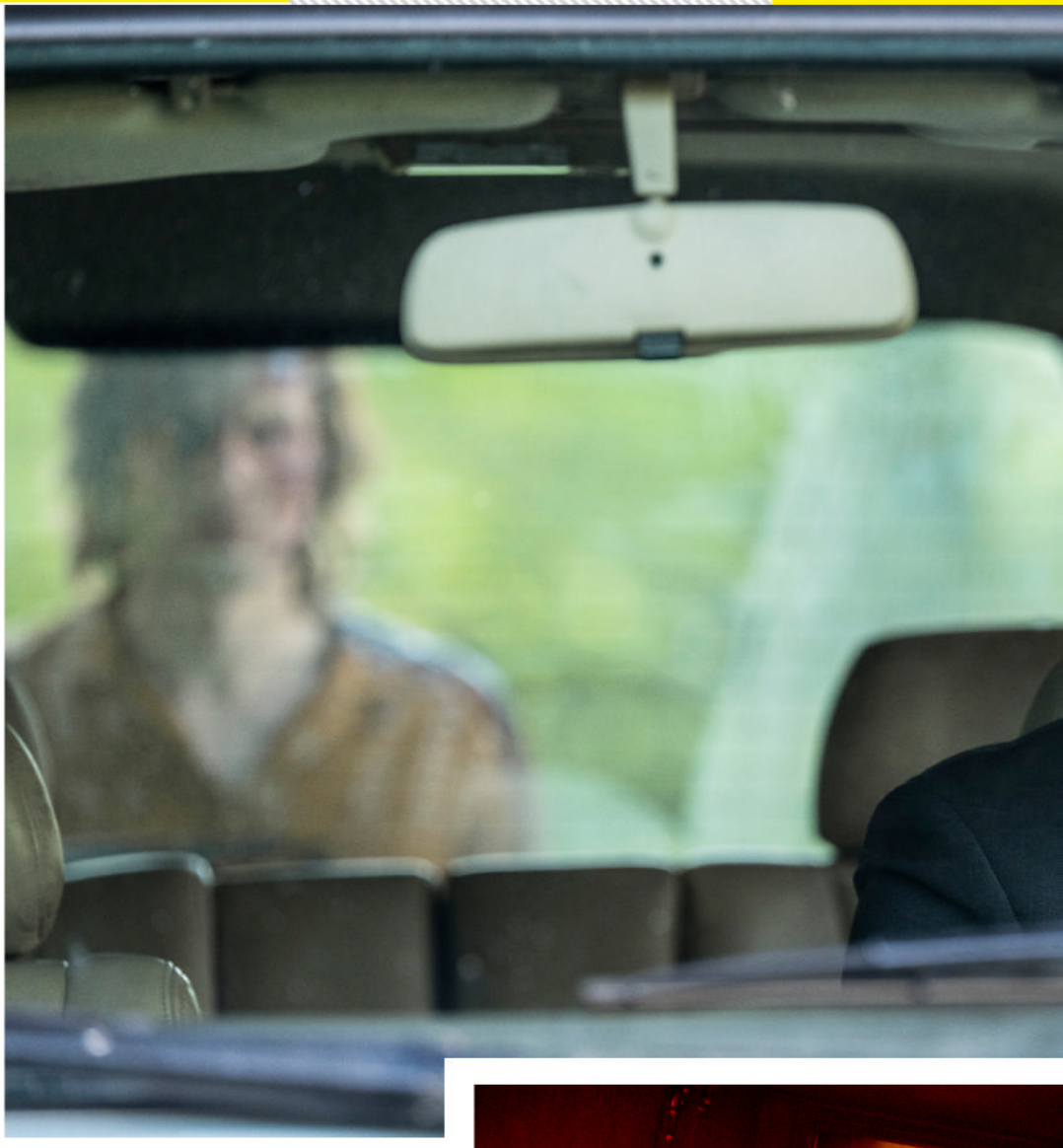
PAST LIVES IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 SEPTEMBER



Getty Images

No./ 7

My mission to make the paranormal personal



Patrick Wilson writes for *Empire* about stepping up to make his directing debut with INSIDIOUS: THE RED DOOR





I'VE BEEN WANTING to get into directing for a while, whether it was directing theatre or working with young actors. I've always loved that side of it. But if someone had told me, when I first started working on *Insidious*, that years later I'd be making my directorial debut with the fifth one, I would not have believed them. This was totally unexpected.

I actually got the offer on the day that I started *The Conjuring 3*. Leigh Whannell had written a 15-page outline, and Blumhouse had sent it to me. Josh Lambert, the character I played in the first two movies, was in it a little bit, but they wanted it to be the story of Dalton, Josh's son. Nothing against them, but that didn't really appeal to me. And it was one of my agents, Matt Martin, who said, "I think we should see if they'd be open to you directing it." My initial reaction was no. I didn't want my directorial debut to be in horror. I love horror, but I've done enough and I didn't want to feel like I was trying to fill James Wan's and Leigh Whannell's shoes.

That feeling lasted about a day. I knew I'd be taken care of by Blumhouse. My main producers would be James and Leigh, guys I trust. And I knew that it would be supported by Sony, and that it would be in theatres. I've got the keys to the kingdom. When I talked to Jason Blum about it, he said he was just mad that he didn't have this idea first.

In a weird way, I didn't think I was pitching myself. I just said, "This is the only way I can do this movie." I can only approach this movie from the inside out, looking at what ten years would do to Josh and Renai, Rose Byrne's character; what it would do to Dalton, played again by Ty Simpkins; and what it's done to the rest of the family... and looking at how we can make that scary and make that emotional. If I'm doing this, it's going to get ugly for these characters. I'm a father of two boys, and you have these dual paths that Dalton and Josh are on. I know that *Insidious* fans tend to skew a little younger than *Conjuring* fans, and so I felt that the movie needed to centre around a young person's coming-of-age story in college. Specifically art college, because that was something I could relate to, having gone to a theatre conservatory.

James always told me, "You've got to make it yours." The visuals were super important



Top to bottom: Josh Lambert (Patrick Wilson) reccommends selfie mode for taking photos of demonic figures on your phone; Dalton Lambert (Ty Simpkins) sees red; Wilson gives direction to Simpkins on set.

to me. I think there might have been an expectation for me, the actor, to not have an idea of what I wanted in the shot. But I've seen this movie on the page for so long that I knew exactly what I wanted. This being a movie with Dalton and Josh dealing with trauma, balancing the light and dark in their life, it's very heavy stuff and doesn't lend itself to jump-scares. There are certainly some very cool jump-scares, but I didn't want to emulate James, or be more like him. So there's a tonal dread.

As for what the future holds for me as a director, I love horror, but I have other sensibilities that I would love to bring to the screen. I'm aware that there's no director attached to *The Conjuring: Last Rites*, but you don't throw your hat into that ring. If they want to pull my hat into that ring, that's a different conversation. Actually, I think Vera Farmiga could direct me, and I could direct her. She and I talk about doing that all the time. It would be awesome.

***INSIDIOUS: THE RED DOOR* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 7 JULY**

A24, Alamy



No./8

From Bluey to bloody

Daley Pearson on his peculiar journey to supernatural horror *Talk To Me* via children's telly

IF YOU THOUGHT Steven Soderbergh's CV was eclectic, wait until you hear about Daley Pearson. The Australian writer/producer/director has had a hand in kids' TV, the MCU, and now one of the year's most anticipated horrors. Here, he charts his wild career.

BLUEY

Pearson's day job is as co-founder (with Charlie Aspinwall) of Ludo Studio, a Brisbane-based production company that largely produces animated shows (although live-action shows and films are on the horizon). "Everything we make is under one roof, from script to screen," says Pearson. That includes Joe Brumm's vastly successful kids' cartoon *Bluey*, about the adventures of a young dog and her loveable family, which has become a global hit. "It's swallowed our lives," he laughs. "We've been trying to grow *Bluey* and make sure it stays as good as it is."

THOR

Pearson, despite not being an actor, is known to millions as Darryl, the Aussie bloke who became roomies with Thor in a couple of comedy shorts directed by Taika Waititi in the run-up to *Thor: Ragnarok*. Pearson had met Waititi for lunch when the latter was prepping *Ragnarok* and wanted to connect with local-ish filmmakers, and got tapped for the first short. But he still had no idea what he was letting himself in for. "Taika had a script, Chris [Hemsworth] had a script, but I don't remember seeing one." Pearson returned to the role for *Thor: Love And Thunder*, where Darryl turned up as a tour guide on New Asgard. "It's a gift that keeps on giving."





TALK TO ME

Talk To Me is a horror film in which a group of friends become addicted to supernatural possession. It's directed by Danny and Michael Philippou, but has its origins in an email Pearson sent to them in 2018, essentially offering up the premise of a short film he had written, and had intended to make at Ludo until *Bluey* blew up. "It feels like, in 2023, being possessed would be more fun than scary," he says. "And one day they sent back 20 pages on that idea. And they kept writing. We spoke about producing it with them, but we said, 'You should go off and do it, and they went off.'" What would Bluey think?

CHRIS HEWITT

***TALK TO ME* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 28 JULY**

Top to bottom: When possession gets out of hand: Mia (Sophie Wilde) in *Talk To Me;* Darryl (Daley Pearson) hangs out with his roomie Thor (Chris Hemsworth) in one of Taika Waititi's comedy shorts; Bluey (far right) with sister Bingo and dad Bandit.



No./ 9

Gal Gadot blows up summer

The HEART OF STONE star on storming the spy world

TOM CRUISE MIGHT be throwing himself off cliffs these days in the name of cinema, but he's not the only one who's pushing the action envelope. Case in point: Gal Gadot in her high-voltage spy movie *Heart Of Stone*, seen here flying through the air, trying to keep her footing on an exploding dirigible while she attempts to safeguard a potentially deadly weapon from a dangerous opponent.

"That *could* be done by people," she assures *Empire* over the phone from LA. For the actor who became iconic as Wonder Woman, it was important that *Heart Of Stone*, in which she plays elite agent Rachel Stone, did not appear like a superhero film. "The scene was even crazier, at a higher altitude," she says, "and we got into the science of it and dialled it down so that a human could do it. That was something I wanted to really make sure we nailed."

To prepare for the sequence, Gadot spent time in a wind tunnel to mimic the conditions up high, before reluctantly handing off the hairiest bits of the scene to her stunt team. "What I can do as an actor, I'll always go for it





She's on fire — Gal Gadot as Rachel Stone.
Left: Filming the explosive scene.

and do that," she says. "To fight with intention and really perform that. But the crazy, crazy stuff, I can't, they won't let me. I worked with very familiar stunt teams, though. They became like family to me."

Yet even as Gadot got into fist fights and shoot-outs and skied down mountains, she strove for human-level action. "It's real. When she's hurt, we feel the pain. She's a badass but at the same time she's going through hardships — she can be emotional."

In the movie we'll first meet Stone working as a tech for an elite MI6 team, with Jamie Dornan and Jing Lusi as kickass field agents. But when their mission goes wrong, she has to engage skills that go far beyond a knack with a keyboard, in a story with a surprising number of twists and turns even by the standards of the gritty spy genre.

It's been a passion project for Gadot, who also produced the film. "After the success of *Wonder Woman*, I realised that there was an audience for a female action protagonist," she says. "I grew up watching Bond, and *Mission*, and Bourne. I wanted to create a really strong, female-driven action movie that is for everybody, not a male story that's been done many times already."

For Gadot, when done right, spy movies prove the perfect form of escapism. "They're thrilling. But I don't want people to come to this movie thinking, 'This is the female Bond.' This is a new idea, a new universe. It's hard to tell these stories without cliché, but we really tried to avoid them." Our hero outrunning an explosion may be verging on cliché, but in mid-air? On a sort of mini-Hindenburg? Your move, James, Jason and Ethan. **HELEN O'HARA**

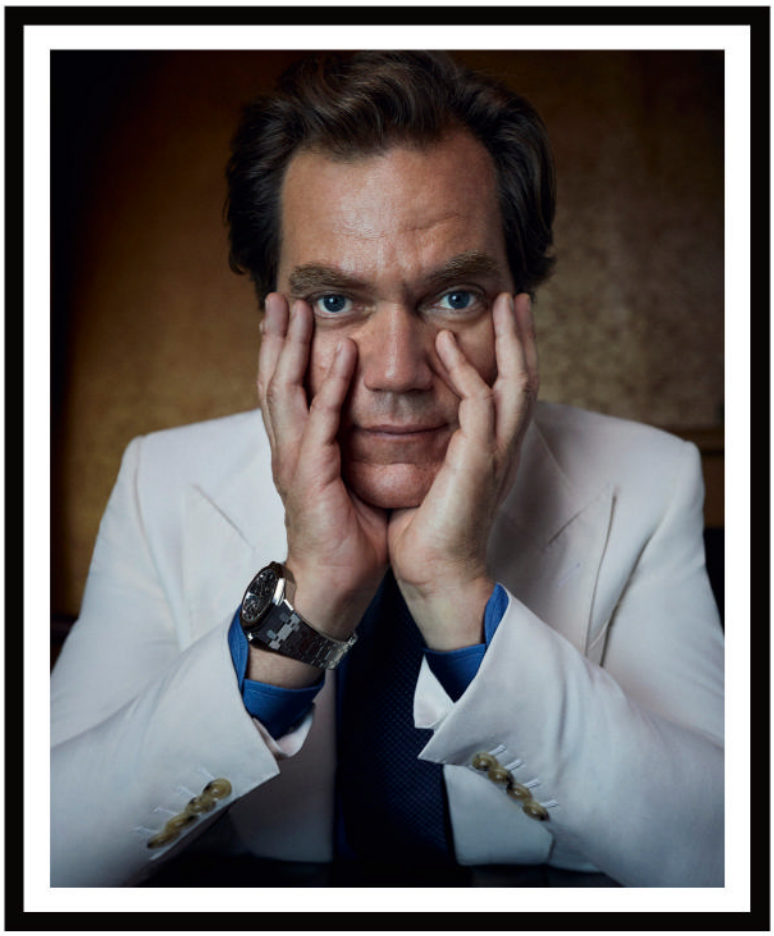
***HEART OF STONE* IS ON NETFLIX FROM 11 AUGUST**

No. /10

"I didn't see myself playing Zod again, because he was dead"

[THE Q&A] MICHAEL SHANNON on returning to the DCEU in *The Flash* and making movies about the climate apocalypse

MICHAEL SHANNON IS Hollywood's go-to guy for men on the edge: characters handsome but haunted, teetering near breaking point. Since his Oscar-nominated turn in Sam Mendes' 2008 drama *Revolutionary Road*, his trademark intensity has lit up everything from whodunnits (*Knives Out*) to superhero blockbusters (*Man Of Steel*), not to mention his five acclaimed collaborations with indie director Jeff Nichols. He tells *Empire* about his own upcoming directorial debut, *Eric Larue*, his return as Superman's nemesis in *The Flash*, and why he once turned down a galaxy far, far away...



What guides how you pick parts at this stage of your career?
I don't have any rules about it. A lot of it has to do with the people involved, but sometimes it's just a case of the story being something that's valuable to put out into the world. I'm in Ireland shooting a movie called *The End* at the minute, a very adventurous musical set in an underground bunker. Tilda Swinton's in it and it's hard to think of a more relevant subject right now. I'm hoping it'll be a real slap-in-the-face call to action. We've had so many calls to action when it comes to climate change, and none seem to have worked, but I think this one is visceral.

Do you turn down roles if they don't have a valuable message? In 2016, for example, you were reported to have declined a part in a *Star Wars* movie — what was the story there?
I'm always a bit wary about those giant movies. Because they take a lot of time and I don't find them very stimulating to work on. I don't ever want to get stuck in a franchise. I don't find them interesting and I don't want to perpetuate them. If I'm making something, I want there to be some kind of purpose to it — I don't want to make mindless entertainment. The world doesn't need more mindless entertainment. We're inundated with it.



Top to bottom: The straight-talking Michael Shannon; Back from the dead as General Zod in this summer's *The Flash*.

How did 2013's *Man Of Steel* differ?
Well, for me, *Man Of Steel* was actually a very relevant story. It's basically looking at a civilisation that destroyed their own planet and think the solution is to go off and destroy another. When you hear that hypothetically, if we destroy the Earth, we might go live on Mars — it's the same thing. I didn't look at Zod as a villain. I just saw him as a guy whose job is to protect his people.

You're back playing Zod this summer in *The Flash*.
Yeah. I didn't see myself playing Zod again, because he was dead. It's actually one of the reasons I made *Man Of Steel* in the first place — it was a one-and-done. So I was pretty shocked to hear about this reprisal of the role. But I like the story that *The Flash* is telling and I wasn't there for a long amount of time — I was just there a couple of weeks — so it didn't break my back to do it.

***The End* won't be your first appearance in an apocalyptic drama full of climate-change allegory. You've often described 2011's *Take Shelter* as one of your favourite parts.**
I really identified with [my character] Curtis in that movie. I feel very similarly to him about how precarious things are and how stressful that is, and how it's almost impossible to keep your wits about you when confronted by the hostile nature of civilisation nowadays.

You've just made your directorial debut. Is that where you see your future, or is there an altogether different left-turn on the horizon? Last year's *George & Tammy* had some fans wondering if you might one day launch a music career of your own...
I thought about it. But I get nervous, because there's a lot of actors who've been in bands and they're kinda terrible! I don't know what comes next. The path tends to reveal itself as I'm walking on it, you know? I'm in a place right now where I'm more interested in examining my personal existence rather than generating work. I might take a break from all of it. You know, if they'll let me!

AL HORNER

THE FLASH IS IN CINEMAS FROM 16 JUNE

Michael Schwartz, Landmark

No./11 Why Cate Blanchett returned to Oz

The actor on making The New Boy, her first film in her native Australia in nearly two decades





Top to bottom: Creature of habit — Sister Eileen (Cate Blanchett) with New Boy (Aswan Reid); Experts in their field: Blanchett with writer-director Warwick Thornton.

CATE BLANCHETT IS perhaps Australia's most decorated actor — but her last film on home turf was *Little Fish*, way back in 2005. Though she hasn't been away entirely (she and her husband, Andrew Upton, ran the Sydney Theatre Company for a decade), Blanchett admits that homesickness was a factor for her in signing up for *The New Boy*, a World War II-era drama about an Aboriginal orphan boy (Aswan Reid) adopted by a Christian nun, and the clash of religion and cultures that follows.

"I mean, you never quite leave Australia," Blanchett tells *Empire* in Cannes, the day after *The New Boy* premiered. "In the pandemic, I was [thinking] about: 'Who do I want to work with? What conversation do I want to be in?' There was, also, a real aching desire to go home." When the film eventually began filming in late 2022, Blanchett had not been back for three-and-a-half years.

The story she ended up telling was Aussie to its core: about the "detritus of colonialism", as Blanchett puts it, and a very personal story for writer-director Warwick Thornton, a First Nations filmmaker who drew elements of the story from his own life. "It has to be personal," Thornton says. "If I'm doing something that I don't have a personal connection to, I feel a little bit fraudulent." As a child, Thornton was sent to a remote missionary boarding school run by Spanish monks; the story also has echoes of Australia's 'Stolen Generation', in which Indigenous children were forced to be raised among white families.

The shoot, in a remote part of South Australia, was inevitably challenging. "I mean, talk about biblical," says Blanchett of the experience. "In a 12-month period, you have floods, bushfires, a huge mouse plague, millions of dead fish in the Murray Darling waterway..."

Despite being tested by the gods, Blanchett says she would return Down Under with Thornton "in a heartbeat". Though their re-team might not necessarily be another Australian story. "What was interesting to me was the response [at the premiere] yesterday from people who were not Australian," she says. "I think, if there's a real universality in the story, good films are good films, no matter where they are made." Fair dinkum. **JOHN NUGENT**

***THE NEW BOY* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

[TREND REPORT]

No./12 BRUTAL BALLS

This big-screen fad is the bomb (literally)

WORDS **BETH WEBB**
ILLUSTRATIONS **BILL McCONKEY**



THE SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE

Alongside a cameo from the iconic monarch King Bob-omb, eagle-eyed *Super Mario 64* fans can spot his stomping ground, the Bob-omb Battlefield — the game's first level — in the film.



OPPENHEIMER

Christopher Nolan's World War II-set biopic follows "father of the atomic bomb" J. Robert Oppenheimer. Early footage of a spherical prototype promises that Nolan has pristinely, terrifyingly captured history in the making.



FAST X

What is the *Fast* franchise without a huge, orb-shaped bomb bumping down the streets of Rome, headed straight for the Vatican, with Dom Toretto in hot pursuit? Here's hoping the Pope took the afternoon off.



No./13

New guestlist, new suspects

As genre-mashing whodunnit THE AFTERPARTY returns, we break down the key players

IN THE CURRENT cavalcade of whodunnits, last year's *The Afterparty* managed to stick out above the corpse-laden parapet. The Apple TV+ series from Chris Miller (he of Lord & Miller fame) was unique: retelling the same murder eight times over, through eight *Rashomon*-style perspectives, each episode with a different genre (action movie, romcom, musical, kids' TV...). Now it's back for another story, with the same MO and same detective, but a largely new cast. Here, Miller introduces the attendees of another afterparty-gone-wrong.

THE VICTIM

Zach Woods (*The Office*'s Gabe) is Edgar, a businessman who ends up dead within five minutes of the first episode, murdered on the night of his wedding. How do you pitch a lifeless role to an actor? "It's the part he was born to play!" laughs Miller. "Luckily, every episode is retelling the events leading up to the murder, so he gets to be alive, too." Given he's deeply unlikeable, there are plenty of motives for why Edgar would be a murder victim. "With this show, you're not just playing a character — you play ten different shades of the same character. It requires actors that have a lot of range and skill. And Zach steals the scene so many times in the season."

THE WIDOW

The suspect list is lengthy, and includes pictured wedding-goers Hannah (Anna Konkle), Isabel (Elizabeth Perkins) and Vivian (Vivian Wu). The first suspect, however, is Edgar's brand-new wife, Grace (played by Poppy Liu). The episode, from Grace's perspective, is described by Miller as "a Jane Austen period piece: lots of crazy costumes and lots of mutton chops for the gentlemen". Complicating matters, Liu was becoming increasingly pregnant as filming continued. "As the shoot went on, we were like, 'Oh, we better give Poppy something to hold here, because she's starting to show...'"

THE FATHER OF THE BRIDE

The Hangover's Ken Jeong plays Grace's father Feng. Aptly, given Jeong is famous for his frenetic energy, his episode is presented as found-footage: "Sort of like if you shot *Uncut Gems* on an iPhone," is how Miller describes it. "It's about a person who's trying to keep a bunch of plates spinning, trying to keep everything from falling apart as things grow more and more desperate." Miller was excited to let Jeong expand beyond his comedic comfort zone, however. "People don't realise that he has a beautiful ability to be sincere and vulnerable," he says, "in a way that I think is gonna surprise you."

THE RETURNING HEROES

The three returning characters from Season 1 are Aniq and Zoë (Sam Richardson and Zoë Chao), now a couple; and Detective Danner (Tiffany Haddish). They act as "a sort of a three-headed Poirot", Miller explains, the one constant in a new cast. In Aniq and Zoë's case, they provide the emotional heart of the season, too. "It's often really tricky, making a murder mystery, to [make people] care about solving the case," Miller explains. "It's a way to let the audience root for characters you're already invested in. That's more engaging for a murder mystery than just, 'Oh, some jerk died, and all these jerks didn't like the jerk, and which jerk did it?'" As for which jerk actually did it: place your bets now.

JOHN NUGENT

THE AFTERPARTY SEASON 2 IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM 12 JULY



Above: Feng (Ken Jeong), Vivian (Vivian Wu), Zoë (Zoë Chao), Anique (Sam Richardson), Grace (Poppy Liu), Hannah (Anna Konkle), Edgar (Zach Woods), Isabel (Elizabeth Perkins). **Left:** The show's creator, Chris Miller, on set with Richardson, who reprises his role from Season 1.

No./14 WHEN SATURDAY NIGHT WENT LIVE

With Jason Reitman making a film about *SNL*'s first episode, here are four things that might feature



BOILED WOLVERINES!

In the opening skit of the episode, aired on 11 October 1975, Michael O'Donaghue played a man attempting to teach John Belushi to speak English. He provides bizarre phrases such as, "Let's boil the wolverines," before collapsing of a heart attack — which Belushi repeats too, thinking it's part of the lesson.



MAD MUPPETS!

Jim Henson was hired to create puppets for a series of adult-orientated sketches. But *SNL*'s stars hated them so much that Belushi threatened to shoot the Muppets with a gun.



ANGRY GEORGE CARLIN!

The first-ever guest host, Carlin clashed with NBC when the network decreed he wear a suit for his monologue. He ended up wearing a jacket over a T-shirt, reportedly performing while stoned.



HUMAN BEES!

In a sketch called Bee Hospital, Gilda Rader is a nurse while Dan Aykroyd, Chevy Chase, Belushi and Garrett Morris play bee-dads, pacing back and forth nervously in ridiculous costumes. It is not a cherished moment in *SNL* history. "I hate the fucking bees!" Belushi would later tell *Rolling Stone*. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

BBC, Marco Vittur



BLACK IN FOCUS

AMON WARMANN chews over the main moment in Black film and TV this month

THE *FAST* FAMILY IS IN A LANE OF ITS OWN

WITH THE RELEASE of *Fast X,* I decided to go back and rewatch the saga from the start. There's so much to enjoy about these films, from their physics-defying vehicular mayhem to the cheesy humour. And as this adrenaline-fuelled journey is coming to a close with a final film in 2025 (that is, unless the rumour of a 12th movie proves to be true), it felt like the perfect way to gear up to say goodbye.

It reminded me that when all's said and done, the thing that Vin Diesel and co might be appreciated for most – other than the numerous "family" GIF's — is the effortless inclusivity. Indeed, long before the questions about who we should be seeing on screen were asked in earnest, the *Fast & Furious* franchise wasn't just doing the work. It was deservedly reaping the rewards.

Even though the first three movies had a traditional white male hero — the late Paul Walker, who died in 2013 — at its centre, they all had characters who grew from mere supporting sidekick roles to crucial elements of Dom's crew. It's hard to imagine a new *F&F* movie without Tyrese Gibson's motor-mouthed Roman Pearce, Ludacris' tech genius Tej Parker, and Sung Kang's seemingly immortal Han pulling off all manner of impossible tasks. Indeed, having a crew consisting of Koreans, African-Americans, Israelis and Brazilian actors is surely one of the reasons why this accessible franchise has become the eighth-highest-grossing film series of all time at $6 billion (so far).

And it's not just the people on screen that showcase the franchise's inclusive nature. The late, great *Boyz N The Hood* director John Singleton helmed *2 Fast 2 Furious* ten years ago — which, among other things, gave us one of the greatest-ever movie titles, while *Straight Outta Compton*'s F. Gary Gray brought his own sense of style to the franchise. We're still living in a time when a person of colour being given a huge budget and a bigger playground to realise their vision feels like a rarity. But again, *Fast & Furious* has proven to be one of the few exceptions to the norm.

The result is arguably the most multicultural found family ever seen in cinema. And although the criteria for what earns you a seat at the film-concluding barbecue table may be at times questionable — let's not forget Deckard Shaw doing the dirty on Han — it's hard not to smile at the sincerity with which Diesel's gravel-voiced hero salutes his growing band of compatriots. When it's time for Dominic Toretto to stop living his life a quarter-mile at a time, we're going to miss him. But hopefully, the rest of Hollywood will follow in his progressive tyre-tracks.



Keeping it in the (found) family: Tej (Chris 'Ludacris' Bridges) and Roman (Tyrese Gibson) in Justin Lin's *Fast & Furious 9*.

CLASSIC PICK OF THE MONTH

LOVERS ROCK (2020)

Franklyn (Micheal Ward) meets Martha (Amarah-Jae St. Aubyn) at a reggae house party in 1980s West London, and sparks fly. The second and best chapter of Steve McQueen's brilliant *Small Axe* anthology. Worth it for the incredible 'Silly Games' sequence alone.



No./15 Danny DeVito's guide to ghosts



The HAUNTED MANSION star on taking down the paranormal in PVC

DANNY DEVITO IS showing *Empire* a picture on his phone, with a fair degree of urgency. It's a reaction to the kind of question you might expect when you sign on to star in a film based on that most terrifying of Disney attractions, The Haunted Mansion: have you ever had a paranormal experience? DeVito furrows his brow. "I've been around a lot longer than you," he says. "I have had many more opportunities to have weird things happen to me." Such as? *Empire* leans in, interested. "You could say, it's a coincidence, but if something happens again and again and again, is it a sign? How do you interpret it?" Like what, Danny? *Empire* entreats.

DeVito digs out his phone, finds a picture, and holds it up to his webcam. "I think I attract the animal kingdom," he says. "Yesterday I was just sitting around, working on something, and I saw this bird. Now I've seen that bird several times." He shows *Empire*. It's a picture of a bird. Possibly a crow. "I don't know if it's the same bird, but I got a feeling it may be."

Who ya gonna call? Bill Oddie, apparently.

Anyway, DeVito promises that *Haunted Mansion* — the definite article has been dropped from the title, so as to suggest that this, and not the 2003 Eddie Murphy movie, is *the* definite article — is going to be a lot scarier than his own brushes with the supernatural. For him, Justin Simien's film perfectly captures the feeling of creeping dread he experienced when he first went to Disneyland (as an adult), and braved The Haunted Mansion. "The thing that struck me about that was the initial disturbing perspective, when you walk into that room; the ways the wall



expanded," he says. "That was the one thing where I was thinking, 'You gotta pull that off.' And he did."

The movie revolves around Rosario Dawson's single mother who, upon moving into

No./16 BRACE YOURSELF FOR BEANIES

The Beanie Bubble's creators brief us on their furry-phenomenon saga

IT'S A WILD STORY

"The fact that $5 beanbag animals were treated like gold for three years is insane," says co-director Kristin Gore of the headline-grabbing '90s Beanie Baby craze. The new film focuses on three woman — played by Elizabeth Banks, Sarah Snook and Geraldine Viswanathan — who aided billionaire Ty Warner in the lucrative endeavour.

IT'S A BEANIE BONANZA

The film opens with motorists fighting over Beanie Babies spilling from an upturned truck, an event that actually happened. It's an OTT image that sets up what's to come. "What we love is that so many of these serious themes that we want to unpack come in this sugar pill of ridiculousness," says co-director Damian Kulash.

IT HAS ITS OWN BEANIE BABIES

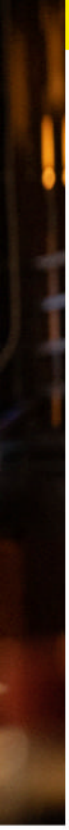
The filmmakers decided to make their own critters, so 120 new designs were created by a specialist stuffed-animal designer. "Every animal you can imagine has been a Beanie Baby," says Kulash. "So if you lined up the thousands of Beanie Babies that have been created [for the film], it would probably cover every one that you ever thought you had."

IT'S INSPIRED BY *CASINO*

Yes, really. "You have these angry men in a place where you're supposed to be wearing pink suits and acting joyful and ridiculous all the time," says Kulash, comparing Scorsese's lead characters to Warner (Zach Galifianakis). You'll never see Patti the Platypus in the same way again. **BETH WEBB**

THE BEANIE BUBBLE IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM 28 JULY





Main: Fantastic in plastic — Danny DeVito as history professor Bruce. **Below:** Jamie Lee Curtis plays Madame Leota.

the titular terraced terror, finds herself reaching out for help, which arrives in the slightly shaky form of LaKeith Stanfield's former paranormal investigator, Owen Wilson's priest, Tiffany Haddish's medium, and DeVito's college history professor, Bruce, who also has a passion for the occult on the side. And, courtesy of costume designer Jeffrey Kurland, a snazzy raincoat. "It's a raincoat and hat, basically," laughs DeVito. "I'm shrink-wrapped into this. I'm like a piece of meat in this. As soon as I saw it, I said, 'This is my whole character in a nutshell, right? He's very, very particular.'"

Haunted Mansion, as you might expect, is inundated with the undead (inundeaded?), and will feature appearances from many of the spectres who populate the attraction at Disney Parks around the world. Jared Leto will play the Hatbox Ghost, for instance, which begs the question of what he sent to his co-stars while in character, while Jamie Lee Curtis is Madame Leota. "All the ghosts that you love from the Haunted Mansion do make an appearance in various ways," teases DeVito. Does he have a favourite? "The Ghost Bride," he enthuses. "She's creepy! Scary! Oh, man! And you never know, if there's a sequel to this, Bruce might like the Ghost Bride too much. That's scary!" Now *that's* something worth trying to take a picture of. **CHRIS HEWITT**

***HAUNTED MANSION* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 11 AUGUST**



On Beanie release days they wear pink: Elizabeth Banks and Zach Galifianakis.



No./17

The melodrama master strikes back

With May December, Todd Haynes returns to his favourite mode. He explains the ingredients for larger-than-life filmmaking

A SCURRILOUS SCANDAL!

The tenth film by Todd Haynes centres around a melodramatic scandal, as many of his films do. "There are definitely themes and interests that recur," Haynes agrees. The movie is about married couple Gracie and Joe (Julianne Moore and Charles Melton), whose relationship began when she was an adult and he was 13. Two decades after the tabloid scandal that followed, a famous actor (played by Natalie Portman) joins the family to research a film about their past. "Gracie and Joe, at the core of this tabloid uprising around that relationship, hunker down and build a fortress around themselves," Haynes explains. "All kinds of layers start to unfold from there."

A FAMILY TORN APART!

Haynes' films often cast an askew glance at the idealised family unit. "I don't think there is a perfect nuclear family," he says. "In many ways that's a precondition of my films." *May December* opens with a seemingly picture-perfect family party, before it slowly emerges "how disturbingly imperfect and troubling a family it was to begin with," Haynes says.

A SCORE TO CHILL THE BONE!

Bombastic music sets the tone of any good melodrama. Unusually, with *May December* the director borrowed a score from another film: Michel Legrand's music for the 1971 costume drama *The Go-Between*. "We were living in that score," he says. "I played it while shooting the movie for everybody. It informed our style." It is that soundtrack which makes lines of dialogue like, "I think we might run out of hot dogs," both incredibly foreboding and intentionally funny. "The music is this ominous, dangerous threat," laughs Haynes. "You're like, 'What the fuck is this movie?' It is a loud, parallel voice."

JULIANNE MOORE!

May December is Haynes' fifth collaboration with Julianne. "It started with Julianne," he says. "It continues with Julianne." Whether exchanging passive-aggressive barbs with Natalie Portman or crying uncontrollably over a pineapple cake, Moore is, for Haynes, the queen of melodrama. "There are moments, every single time we work together, where I am literally spellbound by what she can do on screen, where I don't even entirely understand it." Does he see himself working with the actor forever? "If I'm so lucky." And if we are, too. **JOHN NUGENT**

***MAY DECEMBER* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

Above: Seeing double — Julianne Moore and Natalie Portman. **Below:** Todd Haynes.





No./18

A scrappy shapeshifter's fight to the screen

NIMONA's directors on their underdog film's journey to victory





Top to bottom: Having a knight out: Ballister (Riz Ahmed) and Nimona (Chloë Grace Moretz); Hands up for grrrl power; Nimona is a "powerful little chaotic disruptor", says director Troy Quane.

Zoë McConnell

IT WAS EARLY 2021 when directors Nick Bruno and Troy Quane received the call to say that *Nimona* was being scrapped by Disney. The animated fantasy — based on the influential web series and graphic novel by ND Stevenson — was one domino in a series of casualties following Disney's acquisition of 21st Century Fox. "Remember when you were a kid and you would build a tower of blocks? Then your brother or sister would knock them over and you'd have to rebuild them?" Bruno says when describing the day to *Empire*. "It felt a little like that."

Nimona already had a strong following. The story, set in a medieval future, follows disgraced knight Ballister (voiced by Riz Ahmed), who is joined by sparky shapeshifter Nimona (Chloë Grace Moretz) in a quest to clear his name. It especially struck a chord with LGBTQ+ readers with its themes of identity, acceptance, and a gay co-lead in Ballister. Quane describes a "friends-of-the-film club" they had while developing the project at Blue Sky Studios, *Nimona*'s original home.

"People felt so connected to the material, and just wanted to share their stories and experiences to help make this film and its characters honest," he says. "It was amazing, the level at which people shared. Some stories were beautiful, some heartbreakingly tragic." In a bid to honour their colleagues, Bruno and Quane picked the building blocks back up, and in April 2022, Netflix announced that it would be launching the film.

The end result is an ode to otherness, with some dialogue written by Stevenson himself and a soundtrack brimming with riot-grrrl anthems. "Nimona is such a powerful little chaotic disruptor of a character," says Quane. "This strong, in-your-face, female-led punk just felt right for the character and what the movie was saying." Then there's the animation itself, described by Bruno as "two-and-a-half D", which is tailored to the plucky protagonists' personalities. "The things that are really close to the camera are more detailed," Bruno explains. "It's thematic in that the closer we get to people, the more we see them for who they really are." *Nimona*'s road to the screen has been rocky, but thanks to the very people its story has helped along the way, it makes its way out into the world on its own terms. **BETH WEBB**

***NIMONA* IS ON NETFLIX FROM JUNE**

No./19 Remembering Ray Stevenson

[IN MEMORIAM] ***Empire*'s Chris Hewitt recalls spending time with the late, great actor, who died in May**







Clockwise from left: Ray Stevenson, 1964-2023; The actor in *The Punisher: War Zone* (2008). As Baylan Skoll in *Ahsoka*.

I MET RAY STEVENSON a few times over the years, and liked him enormously on every occasion. The first was at Comic-Con in San Diego in 2008, where we talked about his upcoming lead role in *The Punisher: War Zone* (the first time he would play a Marvel hero), and about how the British actor had seemingly come out of nowhere to become an action star, what with that and his breakthrough as Titus Pullo in *Rome*. We also spoke about how, as a late bloomer who hadn't even graduated drama school until he was 29, he had *lived* — the story of that life was etched on his face. It made him an infinitely more interesting screen presence than many of his smooth-skinned American contemporaries.

Unfortunately, despite being one of the most inventively violent studio movies ever made, *The Punisher* didn't turn Stevenson into the massive movie star he could have been. No matter. He put his head down and put together a career that was the very definition of eclectic: hamming it up as Volstagg in *Thor* (the second time he would play a Marvel hero), doing a South African accent as one of the baddies in *The Other Guys*, going full panto villain in S.S. Rajamouli's glorious *RRR*. He was always fun to watch, always made interesting choices, and was as comfortable with a weapon in his hand as a speech on his lips.

The second time we met was just this past April, at Star Wars Celebration, where I not only spoke to him for *Empire* but hosted the panel for *Ahsoka*, in which he stars as a Dark Jedi, Baylan Skoll. It's a show that, sadly, will effectively be a swansong for Stevenson, who died unexpectedly in May at the age of 58, while shooting a movie in Italy.

On stage, he was a delight, but even more so off, where we joked about our shared Northern Irish heritage (despite his strong Newcastle accent, he was actually born in Lisburn, Northern Ireland, and lived there until he was eight). He had brought his teenage son with him, and was clearly revelling in their shared joy about this new and exciting career path. I remember him laughing, a hearty howl filled with joy, as he left the room that day, and it's that memory that came to me unbidden when I heard the news about his death. The late bloomer, blossoming, and loving every minute.



No./20 BOARD-GAME MOVIE MANIA

Dungeons & Dragons' acclaim is leading to other dice-rolling adaptations

ROOT

A brilliantly brutal and complex game of conflict and control, where players take on different factions (industrious cats, imperious birds, rebellious mice, and a lone, wandering raccoon) in a fierce battle for a patch of woodland. Screenwriters Ben Mekler and Chris Amick (*Kung Fu Panda: The Dragon Knight*) are guiding *Root*'s route through development.

TERRAFORMING MARS

From production company Cobalt Knight comes this sci-fi strategy film, in which rival corporations vie to make Mars habitable for humans. "The *Terraforming Mars* world offers incredible storytelling potential," Cobalt co-founder Christopher Kaminski has said, calling it a "unique human drama" that we're sure will yield a movie that's nothing like *Total Recall*.

GLOOMHAVEN

Gloomhaven is a tabletop blockbuster in which players are mercenaries in a fantasy world created by designer Isaac Childres. Avoiding the usual 'elves and orcs' clichés, Childres' universe features characters who'd look more at home in the *Star Wars* cantina. We're still waiting for an official announcement, but Childres has confirmed that a movie is being discussed.

MICE AND MYSTICS

Optioned by DreamWorks Animation back in 2018, this is an adventure game in which a medieval prince and his friends are transformed into rodents and must survive a dangerous journey through their castle to save the king. However, the attached director is a bit of a surprise: Alexandre Aja, of *Piranha 3D* fame. Expect these mice to pack some serious teeth. **DAN JOLIN**

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PINT OF MILK

BRYAN CRANSTON



ILLUSTRATION ARNO

When were you most starstruck?
Because I have an actor crush on him, Mark Rylance. I was nominated for an Oscar one year and so was he, and as I was walking in my daughter said, "Dad, there's Mark Rylance!" She went up and said, "Mark!" then he turned and she said, "This is my dad." [*Pulls a face like he might faint*] You know when you're nervous and have adrenaline running and you're capable of saying anything stupid, but you don't remember? What did I say? What did I tell him? I don't even remember!

What character were you in your first school play?
I was Professor Flipnoodle, the inventor of a time machine. He had flaming-red curly hair. That was in the fifth grade. I was a very good Flipnoodle.

What one thing do you do better than anyone else you know?
Load the dishwasher. I am a *master* at loading the dishwasher. I don't overload — and that's the key. You don't just load it up and put things on top of each other. No. You have to be *methodical* and *precise*, and make sure that you use your sense of space. That's very important. I also never want to waste water or energy, so in my house it's not allowed to run until it passes my muster and it's absolutely full. Also: forks up, knives down.

How much is a pint of milk?
About... this much [*holds up his hands to indicate roughly a pint*]? I'd say 75 cents. It's 90p now?! That's a lot.

What is your earliest memory?
My mother would go to great lengths to perpetuate the myth of Father Christmas. She took a piece of red cloth and stuck it up the chimney. On Christmas morning, we're opening presents, and she said, "What's that?" So I pulled it out — a piece of red cloth. She said, "Do you think Santa Claus tore his suit on his way out?" I held onto that for a long, long time, because that really solidified the reality in my mind as a young boy. Maybe I was four. Santa Claus was real. With a little swatch of his pants missing.

Where's the strangest place you've ever thrown up?
I was 11 years old and living with my grandparents after my parents broke up. They lived on a little farm and made scrambled eggs with duck eggs, which are much richer than chicken eggs. I ate them and something didn't quite feel right, but my grandma sent me to school. My first class was woodshop. We walked into the wood holding area. Every different kind of wood was in there. The amalgamation of smells from all the different woods just hit me. So I added one more smell they didn't have just moments earlier.

COMING SOON

ARGYLLE
(2023)
Cranston joins a big, buzzy cast including Henry Cavill, Samuel L. Jackson and Bryce Dallas Howard for Matthew Vaughn's globe-trotting Apple spy adventure.

EVERYTHING'S GOING TO BE GREAT
(TBC)
A travelling theatre family wrestling with loss and identity is at the core of this drama from Jon S. Baird. Cranston, Allison Janney and *Avatar: The Way Of Water*'s Jack Champion star.

What is the worst smell in the world?
I think it's if a dog ate my vomit, and then again threw up, and then shat itself. I'm gonna put a pin in that. Because I think that's what it's gonna be.

When was the last time you cleaned your own bathroom?
During the pandemic. So *there*, smartypants. You thought you were going to catch me, didn't you? I don't have anywhere near the collected hours of cleaning the bathroom that I do have loading the dishwasher, so I probably wasn't as good or thorough as a housekeeper.

When were you last naked outdoors?
My wife and I have a jacuzzi in our backyard and will often go in there naked. Public nudity is not necessarily a bad thing! I think Americans are very prudish about that.

On a scale of one to ten, how hairy is your arse?
Negative one. I don't have a hairy ass at all. There was an episode in *Breaking Bad* where something really bad went down and the only justifiable excuse was that I went into a fugue state. In order to solidify that story, I was arrested by the police for being bare-ass naked in the middle of a grocery store in Albuquerque, New Mexico. So you can check my answer! Go and Google "Bryan Cranston naked *Breaking Bad*".

HAYLEY CAMPBELL

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[EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT]



[FILM]

INDIANA JONES AND THE DIAL OF DESTINY

★★★★

OUT **28 JUNE** / CERT **TBC**
153 MINS

DIRECTOR James Mangold
CAST Harrison Ford, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Mads Mikkelsen, Antonio Banderas, Shaunette Renée Wilson, Thomas Kretschmann, Toby Jones, Boyd Holbrook, John Rhys-Davies

PLOT In 1944, archeologist Indiana Jones (Ford) retrieves one half of the Antikythera, an ancient dial built by Archimedes, from the hands of Nazi scientist Jürgen Voller (Mikkelsen). In 1969, Indy's goddaughter Helena (Waller-Bridge) teams up with the adventurer to track the other half down — and potentially change history forever.

IT'S NOT THE years, as someone once put it — it's the mileage. Indiana Jones was feeling that mileage from his very first adventure, 1981's *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, and in *The Dial Of Destiny* — purportedly his last outing — he's feeling the years, too. That seems to be the driving force behind this fifth instalment of the beloved adventure series: what happens when even the most indestructible hero runs out of road?

Of all the iconic characters Harrison Ford has dusted off in recent years, Indiana Jones, tenured professor of archaeology who never worried too much about getting his hands dirty, seems to be the one he has the most fun playing. There's real, rugged, grinning affection in Ford's now five performances, and it's undeniably joyful to see him back in the fedora and leather jacket. Ford may have been conscious, too, that the previous attempt at a swansong, 2008's *Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull*, didn't quite hit the mark; enough good stuff in it to feel almost underrated, but enough silly stuff (the gophers, the aliens, the fridge) to feel the need for one last crack of the course-correcting whip.







Clockwise from left: Surely not more snakes! Harrison Ford returns as intrepid archeologist Indiana Jones; A de-aged Indy in a flashback to 1944; 'Nasty Nazi' Jürgen Voller (Mads Mikkelsen) has Indy's goddaughter and sidekick Helena Shaw (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) in his sights.

For this first Spielberg-less outing, all the hallmarks of the series are there as you'd hope them to be, lovingly preserved like historical treasures: an elaborate booby-trapped cave system; a throwback map sequence; Nazis. But there is also some sadness and regret, a man out of time, surveying the ruins of his life, with a tone that feels unusually sombre for this kind of blockbuster.

That may be the hand of director James Mangold, a filmmaker who understands bittersweet genre pics about beloved pop-culture icons in the twilight of their years (see also: *Logan*). He moves confidently through action set-piece after action set-piece, keeping up a frantic pace — but he is clearly at pains to keep track of the man under the hat.

First, though, we flash back to a younger, more self-assured Indy. The film begins, as all good Indiana Jones movies should, in barnstorming fashion: in 1944, at the close of World War II, with an (only mildly uncanny) de-aged Ford battling the Nazis, attempting to retrieve the Antikythera, which the Nazis are particularly interested in for its godlike powers. (Sound familiar?)

That opening salvo is terrific, and moves at a frantic lick, which makes the timeline jump to 1969 all the more impactful. Dr Jones now lives in a dirt-cheap New York apartment, on the verge of retirement and self-medicating with booze. He is still a lecturing professor, but only just; in a neat contrast to the enamoured, doe-eyed students of *Raiders* and *Last Crusade*, his students are bored and uninterested.

Into this unhappy tableau comes his goddaughter, Phoebe Waller-Bridge's Helena, who sets him off on One Last Quest to find the other half of the Antikythera, and maybe find the spark of adventure he once had. Waller-Bridge is superb, for her part. If Ford is the cranky, ill-tempered hero, she is the witty, sharp-tongued cynic; like Karen Allen's Marion in the first film, a kind of Howards Hawksian woman.

Naturally, the Nazis are still on the case. As Jürgen Voller, Mads Mikkelsen is enjoyably hissable — he is, of course, Hollywood's favourite accent-for-hire, but this is a thoroughly nasty villain, one whose racism and arrogance isn't downplayed. The film doesn't escape the sometimes wobbly politics that the series has sometimes been accused of; the return of John Rhys-Davies, a white Welshman, as the Egyptian character Sallah, feels a needlessly thoughtless choice in 2023. And the globe-trotting can occasionally feel a bit MacGuffin-by-numbers: we must find the thing, which leads us to the map, which will help find the other thing.

But then it reaches its final act, and suddenly all bets are off. The script hints at something wild from the off, but you're never quite sure it's going to go *that* wild. Believe us when we say: it goes that wild. It is a true swing for the fences. *Dial Of Destiny* has the kind of final showdown that almost makes the finale of *Crystal Skull* feel subtle.

Does it work, though — in a way that *Crystal Skull*'s climax didn't? Sort of! It depends if you are willing to go with it. This is a series that has always gestured towards fantasy, conceived by Spielberg and George Lucas as a homage to their beloved 1940s serials, cinema as pulp, and this bold-as-brass ending fits comfortably into that tradition. Importantly, it feels true to Indy as a character. In the end, it seems to suggest, it wasn't about fortune and glory at all, but finding your own little corner of history. And Indy, one way or another, has found it.

JOHN NUGENT

VERDICT **Indy's ultimate date with destiny has a barmy climax that might divide audiences — but if you join him for the ride, it feels like a fitting goodbye to cinema's favourite grave-robber.**



Facing her fears: Sadie (Sophie Thatcher).







Top to bottom: David Dastmalchian as Lester; Sawyer (Vivien Lyra Blair) gets spooked; Chris Messina as Dr Harper.

[FILM]

THE BOOGEYMAN

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **99 MINS**

DIRECTOR Rob Savage
CAST Sophie Thatcher, Chris Messina, Vivien Lyra Blair, David Dastmalchian, Madison Hu, LisaGay Hamilton

PLOT Troubled patient Lester Billings (Dastmalchian) tells therapist Will Harper (Messina) he believes a supernatural entity is responsible for the deaths of his children. Will's own daughters, Sadie (Thatcher) and Sawyer (Blair), fear they may be the Boogeyman's next victims.

IN *HOST* AND *Dashcam*, director Rob Savage explored up-to-the-moment fear — using 2020's modes of storytelling (Zoom meetings, YouTube paranoia) as old terrors crawl out of the shadows of the lockdown-pandemic era. In *The Boogeyman*, adapted from Stephen King's 1973 short story, Savage turns to more traditional horror. Picking up a project initiated before the world went on pause by the *Quiet Place* team of Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, Savage gives us a teen-centred family-values ghost story, powered by gnawing grief and childish wonder and calculated to deliver the maximum number of scares with minimal fuss.

King has been part of the horror landscape for so long, it's easy to forget how ruthless he was when he was hungry. His novels now become dad-appeal telly sagas and prestige movies or testimonials to the enduring spirit like *The Shawshank Redemption*. But when he was turning out fast fright-yarns for magazines, he channelled a lacerating anger and torment which even the man who made *Dashcam* feels a need to soften for the screen. King's Lester Billings is as terrible a thing as the creature which comes out of closets to kill his kids, but — as played in a haunted bit-part by David Dastmalchian — the film makes him a broken, sympathetic figure, leaving out the *Force Majeure* twist which is the most shocking moment in the story (still in print in the *Night Shift* collection). The traditional role of adult-who-doesn't-understand is taken by recently widowed Dr Harper (Chris Messina), who is repeatedly told something dangerous and unnatural lurks behind doors left ajar, but is too distracted to take monsters seriously... always a fatal mistake in a Stephen King movie.

King's *The Boogeyman* is about a parent's worst nightmare — the death of children, a King theme in *Pet Sematary*, *Cujo* and others. Savage's film — which taps into the schoolyard power-struggles King charted in *Carrie*, *Christine* and others — is about how kids react to tragedy and struggle to prevail. Sophie Thatcher as teenage Sadie and Vivien Lyra Blair as her teething younger sister Sawyer are both given a rough ride — Sadie's peers are completely unable to deal with her after her bereavement, while Sawyer is treated with callousness on the junior-school bus ("Is your dad dead too?"). Of course, this isn't a drama about coping with loss — it's a full-on spook picture, which wrings scares and shivers out of an almost indecently basic premise (a monster in the closet) and delivers enough disturbing imagery to give audiences the jitters for a couple of months.

In the story, King cites a favourite comic-book artist — 'Ghastly' Graham Ingels, mainstay of *Tales From The Crypt* in the 1950s — as the only man who could visualise the creature stalking Lester's family. The Boogeyman monster design looks to Ingels, specialist in knuckly, toothy, mouldy contortionist creeps, and manages to be archetypal and yet not like anything seen before. **KIM NEWMAN**

VERDICT **Some *Host* or *Dashcam* fans might be disappointed that Rob Savage has opted for something ostensibly more conventional — but *The Boogeyman* shows he can also make an involving, ungimmicky ghost story with perfectly constructed menace and mayhem.**

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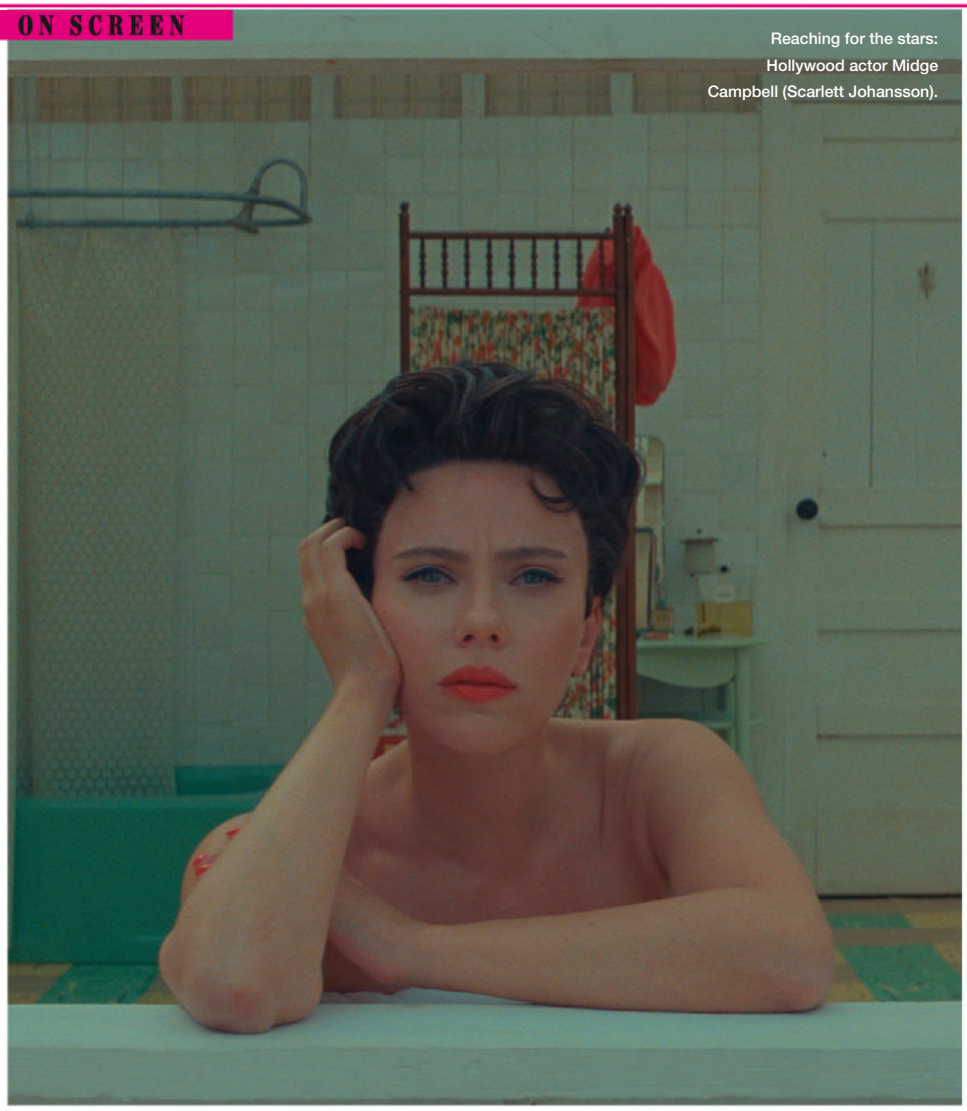
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Reaching for the stars: Hollywood actor Midge Campbell (Scarlett Johansson).







Top to bottom: Hanging out in Asteroid City; Welcome to Alien Radio FM; "Hello? Is it me you're looking for?"

[FILM]

ASTEROID CITY

★★★★

OUT **23 JUNE** / CERT **12A**
105 MINS

DIRECTOR Wes Anderson
CAST Jason Schwartzman, Scarlett Johansson, Tom Hanks, Jeffrey Wright, Tilda Swinton, Bryan Cranston, Edward Norton, Adrien Brody

PLOT Photographer Augie Steenbeck (Schwartzman) and his children make a stop in the remote desert town of Asteroid City (population 87) to repair his car. While there, he encounters some unusual characters — and has a brief brush with life from another world.

YES, WES ANDERSON has — as the jibe goes — made his film again. For some, that's seen as a negative: that somehow the whimsical Texan auteur is simply a one-trick pony. Certainly, few filmmakers have visual hallmarks so culturally ingrained that they could spark a TikTok trend. But *Asteroid City*, his 11th feature, proves that making your film again is no bad thing when said film is always beautifully, painstakingly, lovingly crafted to within an inch of its life. (You'd never criticise Picasso for making yet *another* cube-y painting.) It also demonstrates that Anderson still has the capacity to surprise.

Perhaps most surprising is that it's never entirely clear what is real, and what isn't. As with *The Royal Tenenbaums* or *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *Asteroid City* has a meta framing device, an in-universe piece of fiction driving the action: a 1950s black-and-white television broadcast of "a new play created for the American stage" presented by Bryan Cranston's Rod Serling-esque 'Host'. The main story we are watching — of a sleepy 1950s desert town which plays host to a meteorite crater, and later alien life — is told in parallel with a behind-the-scenes theatrical drama *about* that desert town. Admittedly this can be, at least until the bow-tie ending, a little more confounding than compelling, but that's only because the primary story is, to its core, Vintage Wes.

From minute one, the retro setting proves ripe for his artistic sensibilities, all sunblushed, saturated hues, sharp costuming, and handsome, hyperreal production design (the town looks like a kind of papier-mâché Monument Valley). He remains cinema's most astonishing stylist, the rigour and detail in every frame never better. Wherever you care to look, his visual wit is all there, too, from the "Intermission (optional)" title card that pops up halfway through, to the highway-to-nowhere built due to "route calculation error". Even Anderson's camera moves are funny. (Look out for one very droll extraterrestrial cameo swoop past the lens.)

But if you let him in, the director still wants you to care for these people, to find some attachment in his detached approach. Anderson's fondest, most familiar themes return here: family, fatherhood, grief, love. In yet another stacked, starry cast, the focus is mainly on Jason Schwartzman's Augie Steenbeck; his Max-from-*Rushmore*-esque son, Woodrow (*Eighth Grade*'s Gabe); Augie's father-in-law Stanley (Anderson newcomer Tom Hanks); and movie star Midge Campbell (Scarlett Johansson), all dealing with heartbreak in their own ways. When Stanley says, "I never really loved you," to his son-in-law, there's real pathos there, even if the performance is carefully hemmed in by Andersonian restraint.

As with his last effort, the brilliant-but-exhausting *The French Dispatch*, *Asteroid City* still might prove too much for Ander-sceptics. It is occasionally a bit unfocused, and always a bit indulgent. If you don't like The Wes Anderson Film, you won't like this. But we others must hope he keeps making it. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **Truly delightful. Wes Anderson leans into his trademark eccentricities for a trip to the desert that won't win any converts but will keep the Anderson faithful content.**



THE OTHER FELLOW

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **80 MINS**
DIRECTOR Matthew Bauer
PARTICIPANTS James Bond, James Bond, James Bond, James Bond

The Other Fellow takes its title from a line spoken by George Lazenby in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, a nod that this is a film made by and for Bond fans — yet not necessarily *about* Bond fans. A documentary about real people named James Bond, it instead tracks those who — like Lazenby — have been forced to live in the shadow of a more famous James Bond. The many and various James Bonds interviewed share remarkably similar stories, unearthing frequently funny and interesting insights into masculinity and pop-culture ubiquity. While the film is framed as a Bond-esque thriller itself, it never feels like just one-for-the-fans. Ultimately, it's an extremely watchable look at a unique phenomenon. **JN**



THE MOTHER

★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / CERT **15** / **116 MINS**
DIRECTOR Niki Caro
CAST Jennifer Lopez, Joseph Fiennes, Omari Hardwick, Gael García Bernal

Jennifer Lopez joins the likes of Liam Neeson, Denzel Washington, and Bob Odenkirk in the annals of late-career action-herodom with this slick if slight Netflix outing that doesn't reinvent the wheel but does just enough to entertain. Lopez easily convinces as 'The Mother', a lethal ex-military sniper on the run from dangerous arms dealers and out to protect her daughter. While the action scenes are not exactly revolutionary, they do have a crispness about them; the punches feel impactful, even if one chase scene is so over-edited, it feels as though you're watching *Taken 2*. But this is a film that's first and foremost a showcase for its star, and on that front it — and she — deliver. **AW**



He was a real knockout.

[FILM]

THE LITTLE MERMAID

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **PG**
135 MINS

DIRECTOR Rob Marshall
CAST Halle Bailey, Jonah Hauer-King, Melissa McCarthy, Javier Bardem, Daveed Diggs, Awkwafina, Jacob Tremblay

PLOT Mermaid Ariel (Bailey) is fascinated by the human world and the artefacts she finds on the sea floor. After seeing her first humans, she sells her voice to the sea witch Ursula (McCarthy) for legs so that she can spend time with the human Prince Eric (Hauer-King).

LIVE-ACTION REMAKES of animated classics are Disney's favourite trick these days; it was only a matter of time until 1989's *The Little Mermaid* got the treatment too. As with most of its counterparts, it's longer than the original, and its colours less vibrant, and it doesn't entirely justify its existence. But credit where it's due: a solid cast and heroic VFX effort carry it along, and the new songs are pleasantly catchy.

Pop star Halle Bailey is our hero Ariel, the rebellious daughter of ocean ruler King Triton (Javier Bardem). She has always been fascinated by the world above the surface. But her interest becomes more pointed when she rescues Eric (Jonah Hauer-King), the heir to a vaguely Caribbean island throne, from a shipwreck. To be with him Ariel strikes a bargain with her estranged aunt, the flamboyant sea witch Ursula (Melissa McCarthy), to exchange her voice for legs. Then it's a race against time to secure true love's kiss and make the change permanent.

The basic plot is therefore faithful to the animated version, with a few vaguely feminist updates. Ariel's sisters are transformed from giggling ninnies into rulers of the seven seas in their own right; Ariel throws herself into action and often seems to lead the way for the quieter, more contemplative Eric. But the real change is that it's all a lot longer.

Many of these live-action remakes labour with extraneous detail. That's most obvious visually, because reality (or photo-real VFX) doesn't have the clean lines and expressive simplicity of classic Disney animation. But it's also true plot-wise, with many new threads here alluding to details that don't really go anywhere. Nowadays, it's no longer enough for Ariel to lose her voice; she must give up her "siren song", which may or may not have magical powers responsible for keeping Eric alive during his shipwreck. Such additions increase screentime without impact, and with a running time over two hours, it can occasionally feel flabbier than whale blubber.

Luckily, Bailey is fantastic casting. She has ample pipes for the songs, even resisting the pop-star tendency to sing ten notes where one would do. Director Rob Marshall and returning composer Alan Menken give her some voiceover songs to fill the scenes where Ariel is mute, but they're more filler: Bailey communicates the same emotion in a glance. Still, the new songs aren't bad, with Menken collaborating with superfan Lin-Manuel Miranda to add to, and occasionally tweak, Howard Ashman's original lyrics. There's just one *Hamilton*-ian flourish, a speed rap for Daveed Diggs' Sebastian and Awkwafina's Scuttle, both delightful.

It's made with obvious love for the original, and with enormous efforts in VFX to bring the underwater scenes to life — not always seamlessly, but close. Bailey keeps it all together, but one can't help feeling that that longer runtime has watered down the effect. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT **Another 'live-action' remake that's darker and less compelling than the animated original, but it's saved by Bailey's charming performance, McCarthy's sass and the story's own eternal magic.**



Clockwise from main: Spinning a web: Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) returns; Spider-Man 2099 (Oscar Isaac) meets, er, Spider-Man; Gwen (Hailee Steinfeld), Peter (Jake Johnson) and baby Mayday.

[FILM]

SPIDER-MAN: ACROSS THE SPIDER-VERSE

★★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **PG**
140 MINS

DIRECTORS Kemp Powers, Joaquim Dos Santos, Justin K. Thompson
CAST Shameik Moore, Hailee Steinfeld, Jason Schwartzman, Oscar Isaac, Daniel Kaluuya

PLOT On Earth-1610, Miles Morales (Moore) is the only Spider-Man. When multiversal, portal-covered villain The Spot (Schwartzman) rises up, Gwen (Steinfeld) re-enters Miles' life — revealing an elite Spider-team created by Miguel O'Hara (Isaac).

OKAY, LET'S DO this one last time: five years ago, *Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse* changed... well, everything. The big-screen arrival of Brooklyn-based Spider-Man Miles Morales not only thrillingly remixed the arachno-hero's oft-told origin story and preluded a deluge of live-action multiverse stories — it also entirely redefined what mainstream animated movies could look like with its wildly expressive visual style. It was a cinematic lightning strike; a single film that fundamentally shifted an entire medium — and a genre — in one quick thwip. Now what?

As sequel logic dictates, you go bigger, bolder, darker. Which *Across The Spider-Verse* (to be followed by 2024's *Beyond The Spider-Verse*) does, on all accounts — if the last film was a punky, all-killer no-filler debut, the back-to-back sequels are leaping into psychedelic rock-opera double-album territory. And fear not: Disc 1 is another instant classic. Last time, several Spider-beings entered Miles' universe; now, Miles is heading out into a handful of other 'verses, with wormhole-spewing baddie The Spot (a brilliantly off-kilter Jason Schwartzman) and other reality-destabilising anomalies threatening a multiversal collapse. Misanthropic Miguel O'Hara, aka Spider-Man 2099 (teased at the end of *Into The Spider-Verse*), has assembled an elite Spider-team to stop it.

Narratively, *Across The Spider-Verse* is as satisfyingly structured as its predecessor, spinning its sprawling story in clean lines and compelling character arcs. That's no mean feat, since it takes us from Gwen's universe, to Miles', over to the India-inspired Mumbattan, into Miguel's Nueva York, and beyond — while also introducing Issa Rae's heavily pregnant, motorbike-riding Jessica Drew; the charismatic Pavitr Prabhakar (Karan Soni); the "oi-oi!"-ing Hobie Brown, aka Spider-Punk (Daniel Kaluuya, who nearly steals the whole movie); and



ever-wilder Spider-variants. That clarity can be attributed to writer-producers Phil Lord and Chris Miller — joined on script duties by *Shang-Chi*'s Dave Callaham — whose ability to find emotional resonance and creative potential in unlikely places (*21 Jump Street*, LEGO bricks) remains miraculous.

The mechanisms under the surface are seamless, then — but the overwhelming power of *Across The Spider-Verse* remains the sheer eye-sizzling excellence of its animation, and the electrifying energy it creates. The spectacle here is unparalleled — delivering Gaspar Noé-style glitching credits, evocations of '70s Indian comics, mixed-media scrapbook collages, and Stanley Donwood-esque monochromatic scrawls. It is endlessly inventive in its use of colour,



composition and texture to convey mood and tone. Nowhere does that come through stronger than in Gwen's Earth-65, all washed-out watercolours that shift seamlessly with the storytelling, her emotions blossoming into a symphony of swirling hues — pure cinematic synaesthesia. And as the film opens with an extended sequence in her world (this is Gwen's film as much as it is Miles'), your mind will be blown ten times over before the opening credits even roll. It's utterly breathtaking.

Amid all the chaos, Lord and Miller — and incoming directors Kemp Powers, Joaquim Dos Santos and Justin K. Thompson — deepen every relationship. Miles and Gwen's will-they-won't-they romance is one thing (there are, she points out, deadly consequences for Gwens who date Spider-Men), but it's the parental push-pull that gets the biggest look-in: Gwen's bond with her father reaching breaking point, and Miles' loving parents terrified of a world that likely won't treat him as kindly as they do. And it's breathlessly funny too. A brawl between Miles and The Spot (desperate to be more than a "villain of the week") is interrupted by an unruly goose; a da Vinci-styled Vulture comes face-to-face with Jeff Koons sculptures; *The Wire*'s infamous F-bomb-laden crime-scene investigation gets a PG homage ("Shoot!").

Make no mistake, *Across The Spider-Verse* is masterful. It's pop art that doesn't just pop — it hums, fizzes and bangs; art that doesn't just exist for the sake of being regarded, but uses everything at its disposal to make you feel deeply. It's a blockbuster drum solo — literally, at one point — dazzling on so many levels while never losing the beat; a paean to what's possible when rewriting the rules. It's as good as sequels get — challenging its own mythology, questioning the notion that "anyone can wear the mask", and interrogating the tenets of what makes a Spider-Man. If *Beyond The Spider-Verse* sticks the landing, we could be in for a new all-time-great trilogy. What's up, danger? **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT ***Across The Spider-Verse*** **cranks every dial to 11, and somehow doesn't collapse in on itself. Visually astonishing, emotionally powerful, narratively propulsive — it's another masterpiece.**



Brothers in arms: Interpreter Ahmed (Dar Salim) and soldier John Kinley (Jake Gyllenhaal).

[FILM]

THE COVENANT

★★★★

OUT **NOW (PRIME VIDEO)** / CERT **TBC** / **123 MINS**

DIRECTOR Guy Ritchie
CAST Jake Gyllenhaal, Dar Salim, Sean Sagar, Jason Wong, Rhys Yates, Bobby Schofield, Emily Beecham, Jonny Lee Miller

PLOT Sergeant John Kinley (Gyllenhaal) is serving in the US army in Afghanistan, with help from local interpreter Ahmed (Salim). When Kinley is wounded, Ahmed risks his life and the lives of his family to help, ending up on the Taliban's Most Wanted list as a result.

WHEN THE US army withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, it abandoned hundreds of Afghan interpreters who had risked their lives working against the Taliban. Instead of getting visas to relocate to the US, as they had been promised, at least 300 interpreters were killed by Taliban forces. This grim framework might not seem the most obvious inspiration for a Guy Ritchie film, but *Lock, Stock & Two Smoking Barrels* this ain't. The specific story Ritchie tells is fictional, but fairly plausible: Sergeant John Kinley (Jake Gyllenhaal) is working with interpreter Ahmed (Dar Salim), deep in Taliban-controlled land, when Kinley is injured. Somehow, Ahmed manages to transport him, by hook or by crook, 100 clicks back to safety. Will he be handsomely rewarded for his efforts? That would be a spoiler.

Ritchie does well to keep things feeling tense. Cinema isn't always the best medium for showcasing endurance challenges; stamina is perhaps the virtue most difficult to dramatise on screen. While the sheer distance, temperatures and physical challenges faced by Ahmed are impressive, it's obviously all going to feel much more tense in the moments when he encounters Taliban search parties and gets to slip into more standard spy/action movie mode. Similarly, Gyllenhaal's challenge is to get us invested in the value of persistence in the face of indifference — not exactly the stuff of which *Mission: Impossible* movies are made.

But Jake Gyllenhaal is not a preening leading man, and thank goodness — because you need a Gyllenhaal for this kind of role. Not every actor would be comfortable in a job which requires him to spend a significant stretch of his screentime semi-conscious in a makeshift wagon. And when the time comes for Kinley to spring into action, much of that action involves getting incredibly cross on the telephone after being put on hold for hours by impenetrable, baroque layers of US bureaucracy.

That's not the sort of heroism that's going to work for every A-lister: they're going to be on the phone to their agent asking if they could be doing more scenes where they run towards an explosion in slow motion to save a child. Luckily, Gyllenhaal has almost made a speciality out of playing these kinds of more realistic protagonists: Anthony Swofford, the sniper who doesn't once fire his rifle in *Jarhead*. Tommy, the guy who nearly has an affair with his brother's wife, but then doesn't, in *Brothers*. That energy is perfect for the relatively sober-minded *Covenant* — and allows space for Dar Salim to shine, in a more substantial lead than the majority of his Hollywood roles have afforded him so far. Together, the two build a convincing portrayal of two individuals bound together by a sense of trying to do the right thing in a world where that particular course of action sometimes feels impossible. As Kinley puts it: "There is a hook in me. One that you cannot see, but it is there." **CATHERINE BRAY**

VERDICT **They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but maybe they're wrong: on this evidence, Guy Ritchie can absolutely learn how to make a Paul Greengrass film, delivering a handsome slice of serious war drama.**



GREATEST DAYS

★★

OUT **16 JUNE** / CERT **12A** / **112 MINS**
DIRECTOR Coky Giedroyc
CAST Aisling Bea, Alice Lowe, Amaka Okafor, Jayde Adams

The music of Take That is the soundtrack to this simple story of friendship formed and broken. Five teenage friends bond over a shared love of a boy band, The Boys. They lose touch after a tragic event, but come back together 25 years later when Rachel (Aisling Bea) wins tickets to The Boys' reunion tour in Greece. Oddly, the reason for the fifth friend's absence is played as a late-reveal mystery, despite being obvious. The characters' quietly nursed resentments give an unneeded gloom to this attempted pop party, which ends up a tonal and structural mess. There are a few cleverly conceived numbers, but most feel tacky and stagey. The final sing-along implores us to 'Never Forget', but you'll likely forget this one very quickly. **OR**



HYPNOTIC

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **94 MINS**
DIRECTOR Robert Rodriguez
CAST Ben Affleck, Alice Braga, Hala Finley, William Fichtner

Ben Affleck is in full Sad Affleck mode as a detective searching for his abducted daughter in this wannabe mind-bending thriller that ends up just plain logic-defying. When his brooding detective Danny Rourke encounters a mysterious man (William Fichtner) who appears able to control minds, reality begins to unravel. What follows has as many twists as a trepanning drill, and is about as likely to leave you feeling lobotomised. "This makes no sense!" Affleck shouts in frustration at one point. You're telling us, buddy. Thankfully it's all over in a tight 94 minutes, save for a mid-credits scene featuring yet another ill-advised twist to set up a potential sequel. You'd have to be under a spell. **KP**



LOVE AGAIN

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **104 MINS**
DIRECTOR James C. Strouse
CAST Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Sam Heughan, Russell Tovey, Celine Dion

Believe it or not, this Celine Dion-starring romcom is all about the opera *Orpheus And Eurydice* by Christoph Willibald Gluck. Writer-director James C. Strouse casts Sam Heughan as his mythical poet, here embodied as a music critic who falls in love with book illustrator Mira Ray (Priyanka Chopra Jonas) after inadvertently receiving grief-stricken texts sent to her dead boyfriend's phone. Under the mentorship of Dion, gloriously starring as herself, Rob has a meet-cute with Mira at the opera, but is their burgeoning romance doomed? Such a barely credible plot feels genuinely original in a well-worn genre. It's roughly made, but when a movie moves with such ease from 'Che Farò Senza Euridice?' to 'It's All Coming Back To Me Now', one can only respond with bemused respect. **LC**



WAR PONY

★★★

OUT **9 JUNE** / CERT **15** / **115 MINS**
DIRECTORS Riley Keough, Gina Gammell
CAST Jojo Bapteise Whiting, LaDainian Crazy Thunder, Sprague Hollander

Riley Keough makes her directorial debut alongside Gina Gammell with this spiky, engaging coming-of-age story, inspired and co-written by her *American Honey* co-stars Franklin Sioux Bob and Bill Reddy. It follows two Oglala Lakota boys: young parent Bill (Jojo Bapteise Whiting), who spends his time chasing girls and shirking responsibility, finding ways to make a quick buck; and scrappy schoolboy Matho (LaDainian Crazy Thunder), caught up in trouble-making with his pals. Both acting newcomers, they carry the film incredibly well, remaining sympathetic despite bad decisions. This is restrained but promising stuff from Keough and Gammell, who exhibit strong world-building and a lightness of touch. A moving exploration of fatherhood, racial tension and reservation life. **SB**



PRETTY RED DRESS

★★★★

OUT **16 JUNE** / CERT **15** / **110 MINS**
DIRECTOR Dionne Edwards
CAST Natey Jones, Alexandra Burke, Temilola Olatunbosun

For a film that combines family dynamics with gender identity (plus a musical soundtrack of Tina Turner songs), Dionne Edwards' ambitious feature-film debut offers plenty of heart and emotional weight. Its story of cross-dressing — still something of a taboo subject for many men — feels like a timely examination of Black masculinity. Both Natey Jones (as Travis, an ex-offender with a secret) and Alexandra Burke (as his unsuspecting wife Candice) give stellar performances; their emotional conflict translates into a fascinating look at dominance and vulnerability. The plot occasionally misses opportunities to delve deeper into Travis' psychology and suppressed fantasies, but the emotional investment in Jones and Burke makes this genuinely worthwhile. **KE**



INLAND

★★

OUT **16 JUNE** / CERT **15** / **82 MINS**
DIRECTOR Fridtjof Ryder
CAST Rory Alexander, Mark Rylance, Kathryn Hunter

Judging by the weather-beaten state of her 'missing woman' posters, Lizzie (Kathryn Hunter) has been gone for a long time. Her adult son (Rory Alexander) — newly released from a psychiatric facility — is still haunted by this loss, conjuring the spirit of his presumed-dead parent through ominous, half-remembered bedtime stories and hallucinatory encounters. To its detriment, *Inland* can't quite decide what it wants to be. It's too plodding to be a thriller; too tepid to be a folk horror; too shallow to be a psychological study (Alexander's protagonist has neither a name nor any discernible personality). The resulting film is a confused morass of vaguely foreboding imagery that not even the presence of a kindly, bumbling Mark Rylance can salvage. **YO**

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[FILM]

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY VOL. 3

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A**
150 MINS

DIRECTOR James Gunn
CAST Chris Pratt, Zoe Saldaña, Bradley Cooper, Dave Bautista, Vin Diesel, Karen Gillen, Pom Klementieff, Chukwudi Iwuji, Will Poulter

PLOT On the instruction of the megalomaniacal High Evolutionary (Iwuji), Adam Warlock (Poulter) attacks the Guardians Of The Galaxy, putting Rocket (Cooper) in jeopardy. In response, the Guardians go on an epic quest to save the life of their friend.

NO-ONE EXPECTED THAT the one about the tree and the raccoon would be a highlight of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but so it proved with the first *Guardians*. After a weaker second instalment and a fun Christmas special, director James Gunn closes out his four-part trilogy with a triumph: a big, scrappy mix of humour and terror boasting a heart as big as Drax. The result may be a little too chaotic and sprawling to match the pace of the first film, but it's packed with great moments and far more emotionally resonant.

This time, the danger is not some amorphous threat to life all across the galaxy but a personal crisis: one of the Guardians' own is put into serious peril after a disastrous attack on their Knowhere home. The rest must find the key to saving Rocket (Bradley Cooper), with the clock ticking and their own emotions at the limit. The resulting quest involves teaming up once again with Gamora (Zoe Saldaña), who has no memory of their time together, and facing a new and terrifying adversary in Chukwudi Iwuji's High Evolutionary. To say he has a god complex undersells it; having found the universe lacking, he seeks to remake entire civilisations to his own design — including, it turns out, the Sovereign we saw last time, and their immature creation Adam Warlock (Will Poulter, excellent despite limited screentime). The High Evolutionary is also tied to Rocket's origins, which it turns out is every bit as painful as Mantis (Pom Klementieff) once suggested.

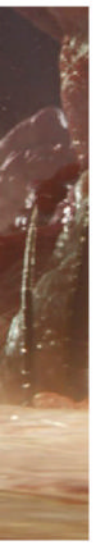
Iwuji's High Evolutionary is not Marvel's showiest villain, but he's a great adversary for the Guardians, a gang of imperfect, damaged people driven by their own grief and pain to save others from both. What could be more at odds with their outlook on the world than someone obsessive about the perfection of all things? The

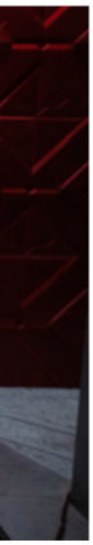


strength of this cast has always been in their weaknesses, the failures and emotional scarring that meant they relied on one another just to get through the day, never mind guard the galaxy.

Having established that his heroes are in this surrogate family for a reason, Gunn smartly looks at what might happen if they dared to look beyond it and actually deal with their trauma rather than hiding from it in the acceptance of each another. So we get flashbacks to Rocket's origin story, and we see Gamora's anger as she







Clockwise from main: The *2001: Space Odyssey* convention was in full swing; Rocket (Bradley Cooper) on the ropes; The High Evolutionary (Chukwudi Iwuji) flanked by Recorders Vim (Miriam Shor) and Theel (Nico Santos).

struggles to reconcile the person she is with the stranger everyone else seems to remember, and we see Star-Lord trying and mostly failing to imagine life without her. If Nebula (Karen Gillan), Mantis, Groot (Vin Diesel) and Dave Bautista's superb Drax remain much as ever, that's only because they were perfectly formed to begin with. But all their attempts to move forward result in a dramatically satisfying and remarkably grown-up approach to a comic-book movie, especially one with this film's wild visuals (giant organic space stations! Bat people! A Ravager merman that communicates with emojis!) and blinding colours.

This isn't perfect. There's bagginess around the middle, thanks to a welter of new characters and a laudable determination to give each member of the ensemble something worthy of their considerable talents, and a couple of fight scenes are cut so fast as to be merely bright blurs. Then there's the all-too-common superhero thing where monumentally horrible things happen only to be brushed aside for another quip, another scrap, another heart-to-heart. But the love that Gunn has for these characters is overwhelming, and that carries it through the rougher and slower patches. He successfully balances his tendency towards occasional snark by letting that love shine through every frame, to often heartbreaking effect.

That's why it feels right that this film allows the Guardians Of The Galaxy to face their fears and abandon the status quo, even if that means saying some painful goodbyes. The High Evolutionary succeeded better than he knew. He forced our favourite bunch of A-holes to grow, and become, perhaps, slightly better people, and that should give us all hope. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT **A return to form for the MCU and for the Guardians, this is tear-jerking and heartwarming in equal measure, keeping its characters in focus despite all the chaos and colour swirling around them.**



Fit as a fiddle: Joseph Bologne (Kelvin Harrison Jr, left) shows how it's done.

[FILM]

CHEVALIER

★★★

OUT **9 JUNE** / CERT **TBC**
107 MINS

DIRECTOR Stephen Williams
CAST Kelvin Harrison Jr., Samara Weaving, Lucy Boynton, Marton Csokas, Alex Fitzalan, Minnie Driver

PLOT The sort-of true story of the rise of Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (Harrison Jr), a French-Caribbean violinist, composer and champion fencer. Roadblocks in his path are racism and a tenuous relationship with the French elite — guiding him down a revolutionary path.

"YOU ARE A TOURIST in their world," Joseph Bologne (Kelvin Harrison Jr, giving one of his liveliest performances to date) is reminded by the Black people around him, surveying his attempts to assimilate into the white French aristocracy. Directed by Stephen Williams and written by Stefani Robinson, *Chevalier* is most exciting when we see the virtuoso musician upending that world — with no more entertaining and cathartic example than its stupendous opening. The spirited preamble relishes the opportunity to introduce us to a pivotal figure who has long been overlooked, with delightful and colourful dramatic embellishments — such as a preening, pompous Mozart (Joseph Prowen, speaking in posh Received Pronunciation) being upstaged by Saint-Georges in a violin battle. The camera sweeps around them — and sweeps the audience up in the future Chevalier's confidence.

The showmanship, we learn, is not just ego; it's self-defence: a flashback to his white father, leaving him at a boarding school, stresses that he "must be excellent, always excellent". It's pressure his white peers don't have, but Joseph has to constantly prove his worth, because to falter is to affirm the beliefs of those condescending peers. Even with his wealth and status, race overrides nationality and social class.

The film quickly brushes his origin story and rise to prominence aside to get to Saint-Georges' moment of clarity regarding the approval of white French people (coded here as the British upper classes, in a double-barrel blast of righteous mockery of two colonial nations). Between hostile conversations with the white French elite, full of barbs with slightly modern inflections, Saint-Georges consults with Marie Antoinette (Lucy Boynton) — a figure with her own famously anachronistic biopic — but even her favour is not enough of a shield. There's not-so-hidden hostility in every room, Robinson's script nestling contemporary arguments and inflections amid subtle barbs, polite chuckles and archaic aristocratic customs.

While Williams opts for traditional, almost painterly imagery, the large and opulent rooms bathed in natural lighting, the film's cinematography feels slightly unimaginative, adding to what feels like a long cooldown from its electrifying opening. This sense of deflation only continues as Saint-Georges engages in a doomed affair with Marie-Josephine de Montalembert (Samara Weaving) that feels far less urgent than the other themes at play.

The film impresses as a period piece actually interested in Blackness as part of a social dynamic and how it would affect the wealthy, so it's a shame that it gradually loses its infectious energy. With its upending of audience expectations around historical figures, the best moments of *Chevalier* both celebrate and lament the great showmen that have spent so long waiting to be honoured. **KAMBOLE CAMPBELL**

VERDICT **The latter half of *Chevalier* is a little by-the-numbers compared to its energetic opening violin duel — though it is uplifted by its sharp critique of white institutions, and a strong performance from Kelvin Harrison Jr.**



Model Timba (Anita-Joy Uwajeh): not one for a quick trim.

[FILM]

MEDUSA DELUXE

★★★★

OUT **9 JUNE** / CERT **15**
101 MINS

DIRECTOR Thomas Hardiman
CAST Clare Perkins, Anita-Joy Uwajeh, Kae Alexander, Harriet Webb, Darrell D'Silva, Luke Pasqualino, Heider Ali

PLOT At a regional hairdressing competition, a hairdresser has been murdered. Paranoia, rumours and hearsay soon spread among the assorted hairdressers, designers, stylists, models and security guards. The murderer, meanwhile, is still at large...

HAIR, IT IS said in *Medusa Deluxe*, is the "crown that you never take off". Yet for one poor hapless hairdresser in this killer-coiffure-comedy, that is precisely his fate: murdered via the gruesome act of scalping, taking the phrase "just a bit off the top" slightly too literally. It's the catalyst for a surreal, stylish, strange and startlingly unique debut from writer-director Thomas Hardiman; amid the current glut of murder-mysteries on screen, this is a determinedly leftfield entry.

For one thing, it is not quite a whodunnit in the traditional sense: there is no Poirot-type detective on the case, and the question of who, in fact, actually dunnit is not really the motivating factor, the killer's identity telegraphed fairly on. It even opens *in medias res*, the murder already in the rear-view mirror. Instead, the film luxuriates in gossip and back-stabbery, the complex character dynamics playing out like a heightened, glamorous, deadly soap opera.

For a low-budget British film, this is an unusually ambitious, ostentatious and visually bold effort, leaning into the 'deluxe' of the title: pure genre, no kitchen sinks in sight. Every frame, right from the *Fight Club*-style opening sequence, is filled with flair and flamboyance. The camerawork, from prolific cinematographer Robbie Ryan (of Andrea Arnold and Ken Loach fame), is boldly staged as one long take, recalling the maze-like single-location claustrophobia of *Birdman*, finding eerie allure in the most mundane backstage dressing rooms. That ambition matches the vertiginous creations of the film's hair stylists (impressive work from the film's actual hair designers, Scarlett O'Connell and Eugene Souleiman), the outlandish and colourful creations — rainbow wigs, Georgian fontanges — only adding to the unreality of it all.

This is a singular affair, and exists purely in its own universe, meaning its defiant reaction against realism can take some adjustment at first. Hardiman's script is made up of almost Tarantino-esque dialogue, all long monologues, tall tales, and lightly profound gems. It's consistently funny too, if darkly witty rather than laugh-out-loud, punctuated with stringently British references (the Little Chef off the A206 gets a shout-out) and at least one filthy shampoo-based insult that deserves to enter the pantheon of superlative slurs.

Through it all, we are constantly given the droll reminder that this high-stakes life-or-death contest is, in fact, merely a regional hairdressing competition; even small-fry showdowns can spark ruthless artistic tension. In turn, the film's own modest resources can sometimes feel stretched — but how refreshing to see a British debut take a big genre swing, all while centring primarily on working-class women of colour. Hair is "dead the minute it leaves the follicle", notes Clare Perkins' stylist Cleve, in a lovely gothic observation; *Medusa Deluxe*, meanwhile, is alive, and glossy, and full of texture. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **Thick with sharpened scissors, and barbers with barbed tongues, *Medusa Deluxe* is a unique take on the whodunnit mould, and a hell of a debut from British filmmaker Thomas Hardiman.**



BOOK CLUB: THE NEXT CHAPTER

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **108 MINS**
DIRECTOR Bill Holderman
CAST Diane Keaton, Jane Fonda, Candice Bergen, Mary Steenburgen

After *80 For Brady*, here's another gentle comedy where Jane Fonda and friends take a trip. It's sharper and funnier than 2018's original *Book Club*, though the plot feels like a jaunty, "It's always wine o'clock" sign. Vivian (Fonda) is now engaged, so her book club friends Diane (Diane Keaton), Carol (Mary Steenburgen) and Sharon (Candice Bergen) plan a trip to Italy; following some extremely gentle obstacles, they emerge happier on the other side. With a few good zingers and a charismatic cast, it's a significant improvement from returning director Bill Holderman. But the plot unrolls towards a happy ending with barely a bend in the road, so it's essential viewing only if you're *really* desperate for a Tuscan getaway. **HOH**



STARS AT NOON

★★

OUT **19 JUNE** / CERT **15** / **138 MINS**
DIRECTOR Claire Denis
CAST Margaret Qualley, Joe Alwyn, Benny Safdie

American journalist Trish (Margaret Qualley) is stranded in Nicaragua, doing dodgy deals, desperate to get home. She meets the mysterious Daniel (Joe Alwyn), a potential escape plan — but as they get more romantically entangled, that becomes increasingly unlikely. Claire Denis' direction is as sensual as ever — that Central American heat pulses out of the screen, as sweat drips and clothes stick — but the film is let down by a wearingly meandering plot and the main pair's lacklustre chemistry. Qualley is a compelling ball of frantic energy, but Alwyn's blank businessman struggles to keep up. Benny Safdie offers rare relief in a supporting role, but this isn't one for the Denis hall of fame. **SB**

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They'd do anything to avoid paying for parking.

[FILM]

FAST X

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A**
141 MINS

DIRECTOR Louis Leterrier
CAST Vin Diesel, Jason Momoa, Michelle Rodriguez, Tyrese Gibson, Ludacris, Nathalie Emmanuel, Charlize Theron, Alan Ritchson

PLOT Dante Reyes (Momoa), son of Rio kingpin Hernan Reyes, has been plotting revenge on Dominic Toretto (Diesel) for killing his father and stealing his fortune. His elaborate plan brings all of Dom's friends — and a few old foes — into his sights.

THE ROAD IS long, with many a winding turn. That leads us to who knows where... *who knows where*.

Given this is a franchise that started in 2001 with Californian street racers ripping off Panasonic VCRs, then turned them into international secret agents last seen launching a car into effing space (in 2021's *F9*), it was hard to fathom where the *Fast* Saga could possibly escalate to next. But, with a new and capable pair of hands at the directing wheel in Louis '*The Transporter*' Leterrier, *Fast X* screeches in determined to top all that's gone before — while clinging tight to the *Fast & Furious* formula that made the series an unlikely box-office phenomenon.

It's all here: the perma-sleeveless Dominic Toretto (Vin Diesel) dispensing gravelly dime-store wisdom ("No-one starts at the finish line"; "Fear is the best teacher"). His ever-expanding team of heisters, bantering and bickering and making up and hugging. A token street race, featuring many close-ups of ladies' bottoms. A bunch of 'surprise' guest appearances. A barbecue. And, of course, a fistful of OTT car stunts that "violate the laws of God and gravity", as new Agency antagonist Aimes (Alan 'Jack Reacher' Ritchson) puts it during one chokingly tongue-in-cheek monologue.

So you'll witness Dom tackling a flaming neutron bomb on the streets of Rome, using his car to fight with helicopters, and driving it down the side of a dam pursued by what appears to be an avalanche of fire. It's utterly ridiculous. It's kinda brilliant.

The thin plot-tissue connecting these entertainingly preposterous set-pieces is provided by a bit of retconning (another *F&F* tradition) that inserts Jason Momoa's Dante Reyes into the thick of the climactic action of *Fast Five*, where his evil pappy Hernan dies. Described as both "a monster" and "the Devil", this vengeful villain is hyped up as the deadliest baddie the Toretto crew has yet faced. But, if we're supposed to treat *Fast X* as *Infinity War* on wheels, Dante doesn't convince as a muscle-car Thanos. He spends much of his time perched in a high place, remote-controlling vehicles while cackling like a chunky Joker, dressed in a style reminiscent of *EEAAO*'s Jobu Tupaki and pulling off ballet poses. Momoa's commitment to unhinged flamboyance *almost* works, but for the most part he's just flummoxingly irksome. We'd like to have seen a bit less of Dante, and a bit more of the psychedelic muffin (don't ask, just watch).

After recent revelations by Vin Diesel about the film being part one of a climactic *trilogy*, it doesn't feel too spoilery to say *Fast X* ends on a massive cliff-hanger, giving its final moments the vibe of those old-timey matinée serials where you know you can't trust anything you've just seen — especially given this 22-year-old series' predilection for resurrection. But, hey, one shouldn't overthink such things. This is *Fast & Furious*. Logic is but a vanishing point in its rear-view. And we wouldn't have it any other way. **DAN JOLIN**

VERDICT **Cinema's least-subtle and most-escalated series hits its sky-high-concept plateau. It's a film that somehow finds new and fabulously silly things to do with cars, while — Momoa's questionable villain aside — being exactly what you'd expect.**



Exchange student Wei-Chen (Jimmy Liu) with the mysterious Guanyin (Michelle Yeoh).







Top to bottom: The Monkey King (Daniel Wu) with Guanyin; Freddy Wong (Ke Huy Quan); Jin (Ben Wang) and Wei-Chen chat celestial war.

[TV]

AMERICAN BORN CHINESE

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **8 OF 8**

SHOWRUNNER Kelvin Yu
CAST Michelle Yeoh, Ben Wang, Jimmy Liu, Yeo Yann Yann, Chin Han, Daniel Wu, Ke Huy Quan

PLOT Jin (Wang) is a teenager struggling to fit in among his peers. When he is assigned to show new exchange student Wei-Chen (Liu) around, he is unexpectedly thrust into an epic battle between mythical Chinese gods — including the mysterious Guanyin (Yeoh).

GENE LUEN YANG wrote the 2006 graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, based on his adolescent years in the early '90s, about the difficulties of being Asian in America, smartly weaving Chinese folk tales and mysticism into its three-part story. This adaptation from showrunner Kelvin Yu takes the book's core elements and reimagines it as a single charming epic adventure. The mythology of the original is threaded into the story of Jin (Ben Wang), an insecure teenager in middle America; after meeting new-kid-in-school Wei-Chen (an excellent Jimmy Liu), son of the legendary Monkey King (Daniel Wu), Jin finds himself embroiled in a celestial war.

With *Shang Chi* director Destin Daniel Cretton as lead director and executive producer, the series heartily embraces the fantasy superhero genre, modernising elements of the classic 16th-century Chinese novel *Journey To The West* for a wider audience. While the graphic novel dealt heavily with Jin's place in the world, Yu and Cretton successfully balance it with some mayhem-packed, well-choreographed fight scenes that wouldn't look out of place in the MCU. The action sequences are riveting, making excellent use of theatrical wushu and 'wire fu'; an epic showdown between Wei-Chen and villain Bull Demon (Leonard Wu) is especially energetic.

Yet it's the non-celestial characters that prove the heart of the series, with an authentic portrayal of a loving immigrant family grappling with a world that sees them as 'other'. Instead of feeling like a lesson in Asian-American life, the show simply treats the microaggressions matter-of-factly. The school's Principal, for example, constantly mistakes Jin's name for 'Jim', and assigns him to show Wei-Chen around because, as they're both Chinese, they will have "so much in common" .

There are genuine and relatable storylines, too, from Jin's immigrant parents, Simon (Chin Han) and Christine (Yeo Yann Yann). Simon finds himself unable to ask his boss for a well-deserved raise, desperate not to cause trouble, while Christine is keen to contribute to the family by starting a small business.

And then there's newly minted Oscar-winner Ke Huy Quan as Freddy, an actor who once starred in a fictional '90s sitcom with some offensive Asian stereotyping (including the tagline, "What could go Wong?"). In a neat parallel with Quan's own real-life experience in Hollywood, Freddy feels constantly patronised for his past role, and struggles to find work that doesn't consist of "nerds, neighbours, and sometimes ninjas". It's an incisive bit of commentary, and only a shame that Freddy's story is quickly brushed aside for the overarching adventure plot.

But that makes sense: *American Born Chinese* is essentially about Jin's journey of self-acceptance and how the people around him play a part in that. That's the theme that runs through these episodes, from Jin's parents encouraging him to be himself, to Freddy telling Asian kids that they don't need to be the punchline. Despite having no magical powers, Jin is the embodiment of that message: that anyone could be the hero. **LAURA SIRIKUL**

VERDICT **A coming-of-age story — with some fantasy-infused martial arts for good measure — *American Born Chinese* is an entertaining ride, with a refreshing take on cultural identity that never feels like a lesson.**

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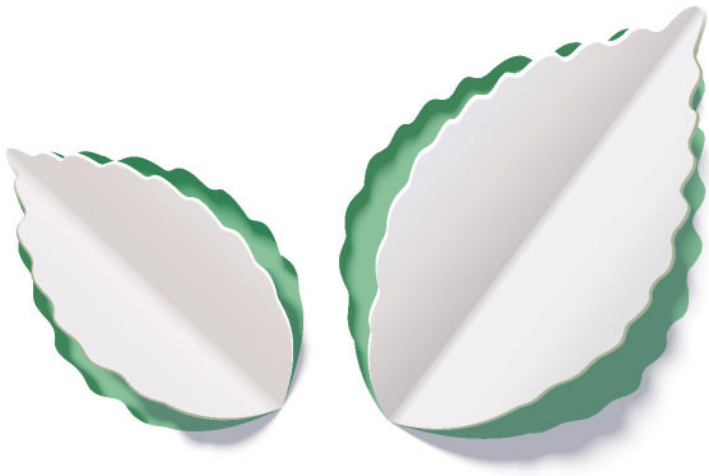
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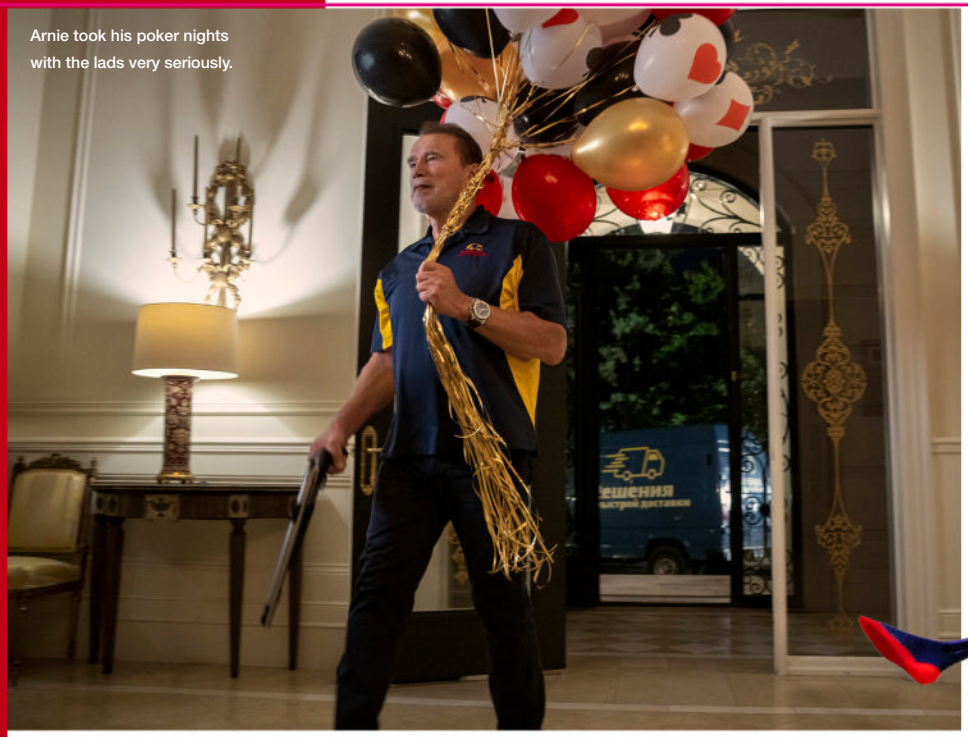
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Photo by StillMoving.Net for Disney



Arnie took his poker nights with the lads very seriously.

[TV]

FUBAR

★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** /
EPISODES VIEWED **8 OF 8**

SHOWRUNNER Nick Santora
CAST Arnold Schwarzenegger, Monica Barbaro, Jay Baruchel, Milan Carter, Fortune Feimster, Gabriel Luna, Fabiana Udenio

PLOT Luke Brunner (Schwarzenegger) is a CIA operative, his true identity hidden from his family for years. He soon discovers his daughter Emma (Barbaro) is also a secret spook. Father and daughter are forced to reluctantly work together to bring down international terrorist Boro (Luna).

"WHATSA MATTER?" Arnold Schwarzenegger famously goaded in 1987's *Predator*. "The CIA got you pushing too many pencils?" Well, as they say, you either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the pencil-pusher. In *Fubar*, Arnie is CIA operative Luke Brunner, and while not quite a full-blown desk-jockey, you can't help but wish he was back in that jungle.

The Austrian Oak has a few more rings on the trunk these days, and still looks damn good in sunglasses, but this — his first major TV role, if you don't count *The New Celebrity Apprentice* — misunderstands the appeal of the great man. It has only a meme-level comprehension of his star power. Yes, he smokes a cigar, rides a motorbike and says, "Choppa!" But is that the best you've got?

Arnie is a unique and singular icon, and like all national treasures needs to be treated with care. With its family-man-living-a-secret-agent-life premise, *Fubar* tries in vain to summon the spirit of *True Lies*; it takes the steady hand of someone like James Cameron to find that delicate tone. Brunner is presented as both genius-level über-spy and a cosy dad figure, Jason Bourne crossed with Phil Dunphy; unlike *True Lies*, it proves an awkward fit here. What you really want to see him doing — big, lumbering, brawns-over-brains badass action — is vanishingly thin on the ground.

Instead, he's left to unfurl a rather boring conspiracy, taking down bog-standard baddie Boro (fellow Terminator Gabriel Luna) with some family dynamics clumsily woven in. Like a lot of TV shows these days, this is a film-length story expanded to a television-length running time, padded with superfluous soapy overplotting: Brunner wants to win back his ex-wife; his daughter and fellow spy Emma (*Top Gun: Maverick*'s Monica Barbaro) is struggling with her work/life balance; Brunner's ex-wife (Fabiana Udenio) is, erm, opening her own fitness supply store. Etc.

Brunner's array of comic-relief sidekicks at the CIA, meanwhile, seem to imply the agency is full of wisecracking goofballs engaging in charming workplace romances, rather than ultra-serious spooks with a penchant for regime change. It's in the comedy side of the 'action-comedy' equation that *Fubar* really falters, its half-written one-liners teeth-pullingly, waterboardingly bad. They aim for Hawkeye from *M*A*S*H* and barely muster Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory*. There are cringingly crude jokes ("Just thinking about firing one of those off gives me a gusher!"); joke formats as outdated as the references ("Haven't seen a climax this lame since *The Sixth Sense*!"); or comebacks so clichéd they should constitute a comedic war crime ("That's what she said!").

The only thing keeping *Fubar* from living up to its own acronym is Arnie himself. His enormous rectangular frame still exudes some mysterious magic. In the moments where he needs to eat the proverbial Green Berets for breakfast, he still convinces. *Fubar* might not herald a new Arnaissance, but it's reassuring to know that he will, as he is fond of reminding us, be back. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **Arnie's first live-action TV series looks to ape *True Lies* but lands closer to *Jingle All The Way* — if *Jingle All The Way* was eight hours long. A genuine slog to get through.**

ON SCREEN CHECKLIST

Your at-a-glance view of this month's reviews



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THE COVENANT	★★★★	P39
FAST X	★★★	P47
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19 JUNE

STARS AT NOON	★★	P44

23 JUNE

ASTEROID CITY	★★★★	P36

28 JUNE

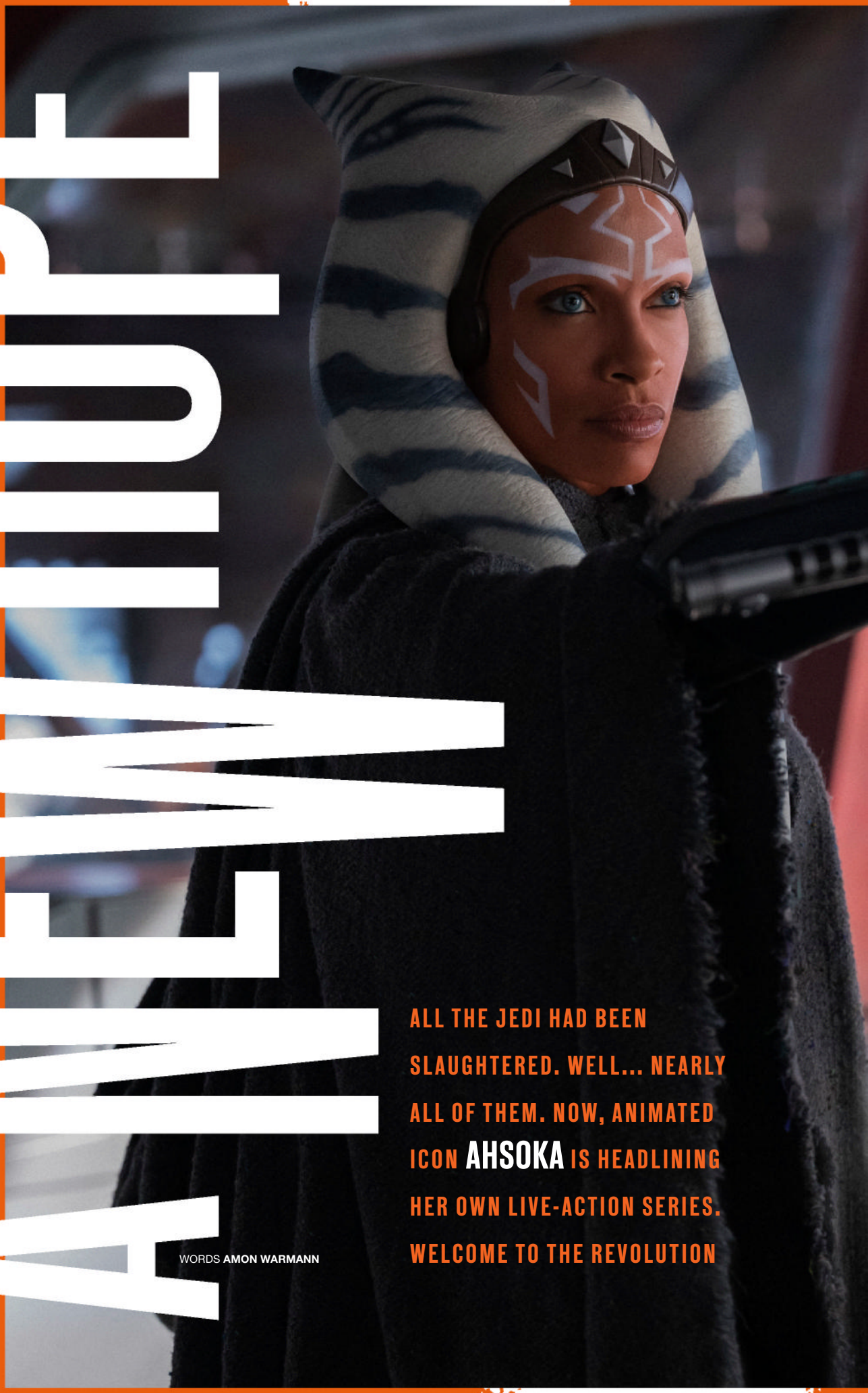
INDIANA JONES AND THE DIAL OF DESTINY	★★★★	P32

TV
OUT NOW

AMERICAN BORN CHINESE	★★★★	P48
FUBAR	★★	P51

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A NEW HOPE



ALL THE JEDI HAD BEEN SLAUGHTERED. WELL... NEARLY ALL OF THEM. NOW, ANIMATED ICON **AHSOKA** IS HEADLINING HER OWN LIVE-ACTION SERIES. WELCOME TO THE REVOLUTION

WORDS **AMON WARMANN**





ALWAYS TWO THERE ARE.

No more. No less. A master and an apprentice.

It was 2005, and with the release of *Revenge Of The Sith*, former Padawan Anakin Skywalker had been fried to a crisp by one mentor and turned into a mechanical maniac by another. He and Obi-Wan Kenobi were no longer compadres. But soon we would get to see Skywalker brought together with a brand-new hero — and this time he would be the master.

"I want Anakin to have a Padawan," George Lucas told Dave Filoni. It was just a few months on from *Sith*'s premiere and Lucas and his then fledgling director were working together on animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, set three years before that film. And just like that, Ahsoka Tano was born. "It was taking Anakin — who is young and brash — and giving him a responsibility," says Filoni now of Lucas' missive. "He could learn that she could protect and defend herself and be a strong individual, and he didn't have to be so overprotective. We pitted her between Obi-Wan and Anakin. That was something that George had laid out and then I developed."

Over the course of *The Clone Wars* and its follow-up, *Star Wars Rebels*, Ahsoka (voiced by Ashley Eckstein) — the franchise's first lead alien, a Togruta from the planet Shili, and one wielding two lightsabers — transformed from an impulsive and immature Jedi to a highly skilled and thoughtful warrior, an instantly iconic addition to the *Star Wars* family. And









Clockwise from main: Rosario Dawson is getting her kicks playing former Jedi Knight Ahsoka Tano; Ahsoka with Mandalorian warrior Sabine Wren (Natasha Liu Bordizzo); Twi'lek rebel leader Hera Syndulla (Mary Elizabeth Winstead).

within time, Filoni began thinking of Ahsoka's next move. "This has been in the works in some form or another over the course of ten years," says Jon Favreau, creator of *The Mandalorian* and a producer on Ahsoka's upcoming solo show. "To have Ahsoka in live-action as a story that could stand alongside all the classic *Star Wars* cinema was something Dave had wanted to do."

Eighteen years after the creation of the character, everything is proceeding as Filoni had foreseen. Rosario Dawson is Ahsoka, having at first embodied her in an episode of *The Mandalorian*, and then *The Book Of Boba Fett*, and now — in the franchise's first live-action show to grow from an animated series — *Ahsoka*.

"I love how confident she is," says Dawson of the character then and now, explaining her appeal. "She's not fearless, but she never hesitates. She is so willing, but she does have worries, she does have stress and she's gone through a lot of anxiety. She's had some really tough crises and traumas in her life. I really dig how complex she is. Even her moments of just finding her way, and butting heads, and being stubborn, and being wrong, having to deal with the pain of what that is when soldiers are dying under her command." No wonder the character has endured. There's a lot to unpack with Ahsoka.

Filoni was once an apprentice himself, a regular *Star Wars* fanatic who had cosplayed (as Jedi Master Plo Koon) at the *Revenge Of The Sith* premiere shortly before becoming Lucas' Padawan. His history as a storyboard artist and director for animated series such as *King Of The Hill* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender* made him the perfect choice for Lucas, who handpicked him to build out Lucasfilm's animation studio from the ground up. Lucas would instruct Filoni in all the ways of *Star Wars* storytelling, directing and more, and Ahsoka was their secret weapon.

But the jump from animation to live-action is not necessarily a safe bet. "The biggest challenge was, there's a whole bunch of audience that know her, and a whole bunch that don't," says Filoni. "She has one foot in the *Star Wars* that a lot of people know because of her connection to Anakin, and yet she's all new and can go in her own direction, in her own way. I think that makes her an interesting bridge between what came before and what's really possible."

So what happens next?

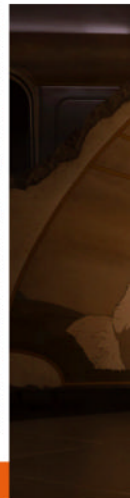
When Ahsoka was first introduced in *The Clone Wars* in 2008, she was reckless, prone to mistakes. *Rebels* saw a more mature version of the character, one who's been through trials and tribulations that saw her leave the Jedi Order and temporarily abandon the fight altogether before becoming a powerful leader in the Resistance. Having been somewhat on the periphery of the show for a while, her fleeting but thrilling appearance in the finale's final moments teased a new journey. One in which she would be at the forefront. And for that, both she and her co-creator would need to evolve.

"Even at the time I did the *Rebels* epilogue, I felt like, 'If I go forward with this, this has to be challenging in another way,'" says Filoni. "And the challenge was going to be live-action. I wanted to resolve these things about her, but I wanted to do something new with it." But before Ahsoka was ready to cross over, Filoni needed to make sure *he* was ready too. "[Lucasfilm president] Kathy Kennedy knew [of] my interest in live-action and was looking for a way for me to make that jump. So she would get me on set, because I was not trained in it at all, and I'd sit there and watch J.J. [Abrams, on *The Force Awakens*], Rian [Johnson, on *The Last Jedi*], and Gareth [Edwards, on *Rogue One*]."

Another member of the *Star Wars* Directorial Council was Favreau. Together, he and Filoni developed *The Mandalorian*, which turned out to be the perfect proving ground for Filoni to test his live-action abilities, by directing the pilot episode. But even then, Ahsoka was never far from Filoni's thoughts. "I had to dive into making *Mando*, but I always had a secondary eye on this," he says. "Jon knew very early on when we were developing *Mando* that Ahsoka was on my mind to bring in as a character, so he and I started having discussions about Rosario on Season 1. I thought she would be the person to ›







play Ahsoka."

In 2017, Dawson had retweeted fan art of herself as Ahsoka, adding, "Ummmm... yes please?! #Ahsoka lives", and word got back to Filoni. The tweet led to a meeting, and the fan-casting became real casting. In 2020, inhabiting the character for the first time in *The Mandalorian*'s second season, Dawson was beside herself. "I have pictures of me jumping up and down and freaking out, and then trying to play it cool when I was first [doing costume] fitting for the character," she says. Filoni was, it seems, even more excited. "From one day working with Rosario it was like, 'Okay. She's Ahsoka. I don't have to worry about that,'" says Filoni. "I really wanted that experience of having somebody embody the character, right in front of you. Every take is different, every take brings something new. When you're used to planning all the smirks and smiles and blinks, all the minutiae of animation, it's a wonder to watch an actor inhabit it in the moment, and bring it all. It's a special kind of magic."

That *Mandalorian* episode — 'The Jedi', written and directed by Filoni — saw Ahsoka team up with Pedro Pascal's Din Djarin to defeat an evil Imperial Magistrate and save the city of Calodan. It was a moment so significant that Lucas, who seldom visits *Star Wars* sets, wanted to witness it himself. "It felt so special and so legit and so real to have George be there," Dawson recalls. "And it felt really nice, in this birthing of Ahsoka on screen in live-action, to have both of my creators there. There was a really excited energy to all of it, and George sprinkling his magic dust on it felt like validation and approval."

For Favreau — who took the internet-breaking photo of Lucas holding Grogu on the day — there was a special satisfaction in watching Ahsoka's inventors interact on set. "George comes in and he's like a martial-arts teacher," he remembers. "'How many set-ups did you get? You're not shooting fast enough!' He would give Dave a hard time in a very playful and caring way. He has nothing but tremendous care and respect for Dave. I think he sees Dave's creative life as an extension of the relationship that they had."

But the all-too-brief live-action appearances in *The Mandalorian* and *The Book Of Boba Fett* weren't enough. Ahsoka demanded more. "It was sort of this promise that was hanging in the air," says Dawson. "Because it wasn't just what we were shooting that day. If this went off well, it was potentially doing this for a long time to come."

It did go off well — proof positive that Ahsoka could be just as winning in live-action as she was in animation. "Ahsoka is a unique balance between old and new," says Filoni. "And doing the one episode with Rosario, I felt strongly about what she brought to the table performance-wise, so I was







Clockwise from left: A dread Inquisitor wields their trademark spinning, double-bladed lightsaber; Dave Filoni with Dawson on set; Where live-action meets animation: Sabine Wren looks upon a mural that nods to animated series *Rebels*.

very excited at the opportunity to make the show."

So now *Ahsoka* will continue her story on a bigger stage, providing a chance to explore her complexities like never before. "I love it when you play a character like Ahsoka who's such an expert, who's so capable, but there's still room for growth," says Dawson. "That's where you find her. There's more evolution to be had."

I am no Jedi."

It's one of Ahsoka's most fêted lines, said in retort to her master-turned-Sith Lord Darth Vader in the heat of battle in *Rebels*. But it's also an indicator of her current mindset. Though she still behaves like a Jedi — from her lightsaber-wielding acumen to her selfless nature — what happened to her former Order still weighs heavily on her. "She's a wanderer at this point," says Filoni, "and is in a lot of ways wary of any organisation as such because of the power that comes with it as a group."

When *Ahsoka* begins, she's somewhat adrift. "She walks a path that basically died out a long time ago," says Filoni. "And there aren't many like her left, if any. So that's a lonely thing. What is that life like? If you are a loner, you have a very small circle of friends. What is it like, then, when you try to open back up?"

Those attempting to get Ahsoka to do just that will be familiar to fans of *Rebels*. Over the course of 75 episodes totalling 31 hours, the show followed the found family of Jedi Padawan Ezra Bridger, Jedi Knight Kanan Jarrus, Twi'lek pilot Hera Syndulla, alien muscle Zeb Orrelios, Mandalorian warrior/graffiti artist Sabine Wren and cantankerous droid Chopper on their adventures as they fought back against the Empire. It made for some pretty intensive homework for the new *Ahsoka* cast tasked with continuing their characters' stories in live-action.

"Dave gave me a list of episodes and specific scenes," says Mary Elizabeth Winstead, who plays the formidable Hera. "There was a lot of looking at episodes that focused on how much she loves to fly, and the way that that turned on her spirit and her energy." As for Natasha Liu Bordizzo, who plays Sabine, she made sure to binge as much *Star Wars* as she could. At least, until it was time to go on camera. "I did not watch *Rebels* at all after we started filming," she says. "I wanted to separate that whole kind of expectation. I think it's just healthy, because you're finding a different truth in live-action."

Rebels' final moments are a springboard for *Ahsoka*. It ends on a cliffhanger: Ezra, now an impressive Jedi after four seasons' worth of training, helps liberate his homeworld of Lothal from the Empire by transporting his ship and the Empire's forces to destinations unknown. A pre-recorded message to his friends in the aftermath sees him tell Sabine he's counting on her, and the final moments see her set off with Ahsoka to find him. At the outset of *Ahsoka*, Sabine is still grappling with what she lost and hasn't yet found. "She feels an obligation to ›

SUPER AHSOKA

FOUR ANIMATED APPEARANCES TO GET YOU UP TO SPEED



THE WRONG JEDI

***STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS*, SEASON 5, EPISODE 20**

This concludes an arc that sees Ahsoka on trial for murder after being framed for a bombing at the Jedi Temple. Though her innocence is proven, her faith in the Jedi is shaken and she walks away from the Order. Your loss, Yoda.



TWILIGHT OF THE APPRENTICE: PART TWO

***STAR WARS REBELS*, SEASON 2, EPISODE 22**

Obi-Wan is not the only warrior to split Darth Vader's helmet in half: Ahsoka got there first when she went 'saber to 'saber with her former master in an ancient Sith temple. Loooong had fans waited for this inevitable battle.



A WORLD BETWEEN WORLDS

***STAR WARS REBELS*, SEASON 4, EPISODE 13**

Ahsoka's fate after her battle with Vader is revealed in this episode, which also introduces time-travel to *Star Wars* via The World Between Worlds. *Ahsoka*'s trailer revealed that this will be revisited in the live-action show.



FAMILY REUNION – AND FAREWELL

***STAR WARS REBELS*, SEASON 4 EPISODE 16**

It's Grand Admiral Thrawn versus our heroes in *Rebels*' epic series finale. We thought this was goodbye to Ezra, Hera and Sabine, but here we are! Now let *Ahsoka* pick up the threads...



him," says Bordizzo. "When they freed Lothal, she was given this hero status. But she doesn't feel that she's earned that because she lost her friend in that whole debacle. She's just focused on the promise she made to him to find him."

Meanwhile, Ahsoka and her rebel friends won't be the only familiar characters making the jump to live-action. There is another. And his roots go back *much* further than *Rebels*.

Grand Admiral Thrawn had been waiting. Patiently. He was originally created in a trilogy of *Star Wars* novels by Timothy Zahn between 1991 and 1993. Over two decades later, though, Filoni adapted the character for the final two seasons of *Rebels*. "I read *Heir To The Empire* when it came out, and I respect the work that Timothy did," says Filoni. "And now to think all these years later, that I have a responsibility to realise that character in this way... it's special."

Thrawn is a unique *Star Wars* villain. His impressive intellect saw him rapidly rise up the ranks of the Imperial Navy. Always five steps ahead of his opponent, he's a foe who doesn't need the Force to be a force to be reckoned with. For *Rebels*, Filoni cast Lars Mikkelsen, whose calm and understated vocals were the perfect fit. "I love the way he rises through the Empire, and the way he carries himself in that environment to become somebody," says Mikkelsen now. "And then of course, how can you not like a very clever villain? Thrawn takes the time to understand his opponent's culture, and what they're about. It's lovely to be playing that."

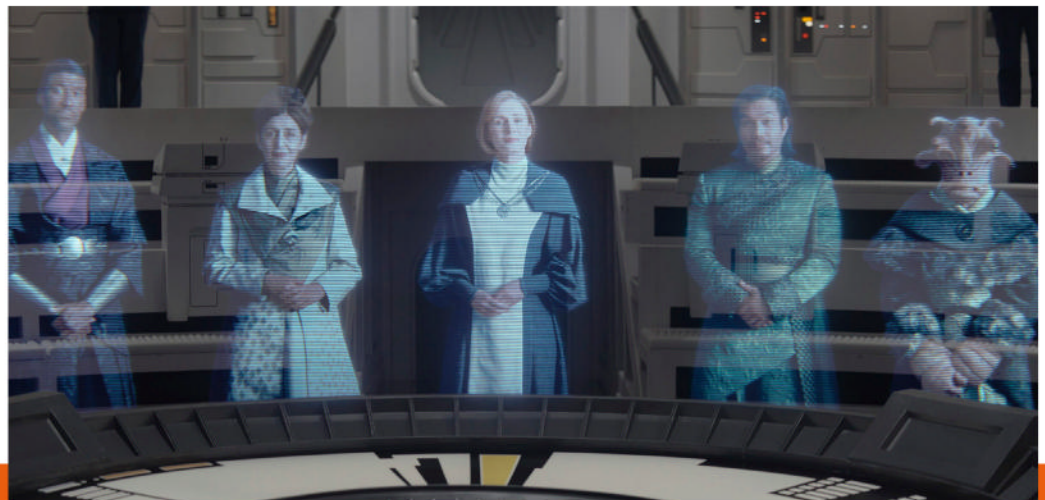
When it came time to bring Thrawn to live-action, both Filoni and Mikkelsen decided to abide by the 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' rule. "I'm not losing the voice, but I am tweaking it into live-action," says Mikkelsen. "When you do an animated character, there's a whole melodious approach. When you're there as a real person, that would be just slightly too much." Other considerations included replicating Thrawn's distinct look on screen. Blue-skinned and red-eyed, the transformation took two to three hours each day, but it was all worth it for the reactions Mikkelsen got when he first strode onto set in full Thrawn regalia. "It was fun," he recalls. "Because it's not every day you see a blue man."

Accompanying Thrawn will be some dastardly allies. They include Diana Lee Inosanto's Morgan Elsbeth — the evil Imperial Magistrate from 'The Jedi' — who returns with a score to settle after being bested by Ahsoka in combat. "She's very angry, and really annoyed with Ahsoka," says Inosanto. "Her loyalty to Thrawn has never wavered. She's absolutely dedicated to his vision, and they









Top to bottom: Villainous Baylan Skoll (Ray Stevenson) and apprentice Shin Hati (Ivanna Sakhno); Grand Admiral Thrawn (Lars Mikkelsen); Rebel leader Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly, centre) and allies.

have a lot in common." Then there's Baylan Skoll (Ray Stevenson) and Shin Hati (Ivanna Sakhno), a master and apprentice duo who will cross lightsaber blades with Ahsoka. The former was once a Jedi before turning mercenary-for-hire after surviving Order 66. "He has a stoic lethality in that there's a purpose to him," Stevenson says. "He is not genocidal or malicious or overly aggressive. He will request that you get out of his way. But if you don't, he will take you out of his way."

The galaxy is growing. For one thing, this *Star Wars* project is more female-focused than any before it, boasting a number of prominent women in key roles and positions of leadership, from Ahsoka to Sabine to Hera to Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly, reprising her role from *Andor*). "Even though it is so incredibly rare, it just felt so natural," says Winstead. "It just didn't really click in my mind until we were a little bit into production, and I was looking around going, 'Oh my gosh, look at all these women. This is incredible.'"

For another, the galaxy far, far away has also never been more diverse. From Diego Luna in *Andor* to Pedro Pascal in *The Mandalorian* to Jodie Turner-Smith in the upcoming series *The Acolyte*, *Star Wars* feels more representative than ever of its multicultural fanbase. That looks set to continue in a major way with *Ahsoka*. "You definitely feel the magic of it," says Dawson. "Our diversity is our strength. Being able to step into and relate to a protagonist that looks different to what we've normally been served over the years, you can see how hungry people are for it. I take it very seriously, I'm very grateful."

When the time comes for Filoni to show Lucas the fruits of his labour, he predicts a mixture of excitement and anxiety. "It's almost like when you turn in a big paper at school," he laughs. "It's like, 'Here it is!'" Dawson, meanwhile, having made the character flesh, cannot wait for *Ahsoka* to be released. "Trying to play the quiet moments and scenes, and really think about her internal life, has made her so real to me," she says. "It doesn't just feel like I'm putting on a costume, and I think that what is so beautiful when I talk to people and hear what she means to them is just how real she has been for them as well. Which is powerful."

On and off screen, Ahsoka has been having quite the journey. "She still is!" laughs Dawson. Indeed, the character's evolution needn't stop when this eight-episode season concludes. "I'm absolutely putting it out into the universe," says the star. "We're joking about it, but I'm manifesting it because I feel like I helped Dave manifest this role. So I'm ready. I'm excited. I'm willing. I got my ice-packs ready to go for Season 2 and beyond! I would not be mad at that."

Playing Ahsoka in her own show has been a thrill. "Getting the opportunities to embody her more and more, and collaborating with everyone as things have shifted and developed and progressed... it's just been amazing," she says. "I feel like I'm still at the 'overwhelm' level of all of it. If anything, it's only ramped up. That same sort of excitement that I saw on people's reaction videos [to her inaugural *Mandalorian* appearance] is how I keep feeling every day when I look in the mirror and get to do what I get to do."

The character is finally getting her full due, Filoni's dream come true, his co-creation forging the future of *Star Wars*. He and Ahsoka are both ready to showcase all that they've learned. And then some.

***AHSOKA* IS ON DISNEY+ IN AUGUST**



FAST AND

ON MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE – DEAD RECKONING PART ONE, TOM CRUISE AND DIRECTOR CHRISTOPHER McQUARRIE FOUND THEMSELVES BATTLING ALL SORTS OF ELEMENTS, RESPONDING BY MAKING THINGS UP AS THEY WENT. THIS, THEY TELL EMPIRE, WAS THEIR MOST INSANE PRODUCTION YET. STRAP IN...

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT


LOOSE



Christopher McQuarrie had a problem. He was well into production on *Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning Part One* when the news came through. Berlin was no longer going to let him use an under-construction airport he had earmarked. "We were going to shoot this airport sequence and a foot chase there," he says. "And then Berlin said, 'No, we're too close to the opening of the airport.'" Suddenly, the foot chase was off. The airport sequence was out. Another punch to roll with, on a production packed with them.

"Then Abu Dhabi said, 'Well, we have an airport,'" recalls McQuarrie. "And we said, 'Great — instead of a foot chase, let's do something in the desert.'" Which is how McQuarrie, his star/producer/creative partner Tom Cruise, and the cast and crew of *Dead Reckoning* wound up in Abu Dhabi, making what McQuarrie calls "the hardest, hardest sequence I have ever had to work out. Now, it's a sequence of which we are immensely, immensely proud. But it's like everything else on *Mission* — if I'd known going in, I would never have done it."

Welcome to the McQuarrie/Cruise method of making movies, honed over the course of their decade-and-change working relationship, through the likes of *Valkyrie* (co-written by McQuarrie), *Jack Reacher* (which he wrote and directed) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (which he co-wrote and produced), plus a whole host of *Mission: Impossible*s. It is loose, it is improvisational (except for the big stunts, which are planned with military precision), it is not for studios that are faint of heart or shallow of pocket. It is, says Tom Cruise, "never boring", the star unleashing *that* laugh. "Never boring. It's constantly evolving. You have to be pretty unrelenting, and honest with yourself about stories and structure and what's working and what's not. I don't want to stop until it's right."

Which pretty much sums up the experience of making *Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning Part One*, aka *Mission: Impossible 7*, aka the first part of a two-part epic that sees Cruise's Ethan Hunt face his greatest challenge yet. It is both the apotheosis of that method, and the duo's greatest challenge: a sprawling, constantly shifting, Covid-affected juggernaut that, only now, is finally slowing down. Its shoot has become the stuff of legend, with McQuarrie and Cruise and their cast and crew ploughing on through the pandemic and its prohibitive protocols, enduring numerous shutdowns (most brief, one lengthy), moving from country to country to get the best available locations. And from the first shot until the last, some two-and-a-half years elapsed. "We were in the middle of it," recalls Cruise, "and I kept looking at McQ [McQuarrie's nickname] going, 'Remember, this was your idea!'"

Here's how that idea refined their method, and unfolded into an odyssey.

THE MISSION SELF-DESTRUCTS

Dead Reckoning, it is reckoned, was due to get underway in February 2020, when McQuarrie and some of his cast and crew (Cruise hadn't yet arrived) assembled in Venice. But with just two days to go until filming began, and sets built, Covid-19 reared its ugly mug and shut everything down. "I was on a little bridge, doing a roll-up on one of the stunt guys, and I nailed it," recalls Rebecca Ferguson, back as Ilsa Faust. "And then they said, 'Something's going on. We're just gonna pause shooting for a little bit.' That pause kept expanding."

McQuarrie reacted sanguinely, but he and Cruise were also adamant that the shutdown would be temporary. They petitioned Paramount to keep the crew on the payroll, and kept on prepping, kept on planning, waiting for a country to open up to them so they could finally begin. "He thrives on crisis, McQ," says Simon Pegg, who returns as the jovial Benji Dunn. "He'd much rather you give him a puzzle to solve than a blank page. He's the king of solving shit."

Above: Ready for another impossible mission? Rebecca Ferguson, Ving Rhames, Simon Pegg and Tom Cruise return.









Right, top to bottom: Cruise showing some funny YouTube cat videos to director Christopher McQuarrie. Maybe; Ethan Hunt on the run, again; All aboard? Just another day for Cruise and *Mission* newbie Hayley Atwell.

RAMPING UP

Shit first began to get solved on 6 September 2020, when Cruise kickstarted two things: a bike, and the beginning of production on *Dead Reckoning Part One*. The bike was used to drive off a giant ramp built on a cliff in Helsetkopen, Norway, all part of the latest episode of the hit new show 'Tom Cruise's Latest Stunt Is Even More Dangerous Than His Last One'. At that point, McQuarrie wasn't entirely sure why Ethan was driving a bike off a cliff, other than Cruise had wanted to do it. "Doing that on Day One gave us all the time in the world to understand why he was doing what he was doing," he says. "If we sat around and tried to figure out these movies the old-fashioned way, you'd never find it, simply because it's such a living, breathing thing." Now, of course, McQuarrie has figured it all out; what Ethan is going after, and why, even if that information is currently on a need-to-know basis, and at this point we don't need to know. The king of solving shit, back on his throne, reigning over all he surveys.

That stunt has been well documented since, both in the pages of *Empire* and in a featurette that played in front of *Top Gun: Maverick*. Suffice it to say: it was hair-raising. But for Cruise in particular, it was a flag in the sand, a *Mission* statement of intent. "It's never the easy road," he says. "I have a responsibility to audiences, the studio, my crew, my cast and industry. We can't compromise just because all of these things happened. I can't compromise the storytelling."

THE ITALIAN JOB

In October of 2020, the production returned to Italy, with Covid protocols firmly in place. First, there was Venice, where there was much punching, and running, and fighting, and Simon Pegg got to drive a boat. Not to everyone's satisfaction, but it's a high bar on a *Mission* movie. "I had to go into the canals of Venice in a $300,000 bespoke, beautifully handcrafted boat, and driving around at night was pretty epic," he says. "It's also easy to just crash it into a protruding piece of concrete." Nobody's perfect.

But the big chunk of action came when production shifted a couple of weeks later to Rome, and served as the series introduction to Hayley Atwell as a character named... well, she didn't know. Nobody did. Not even McQuarrie. "Hayley's character didn't have a name for a long, long time," he admits. "She has her own objective, and she more or less becomes ensnared in this movie. What you have here is a character who absolutely does not belong in ›

a *Mission: Impossible* movie, and she's doing everything she can to get out of it."

As a result, the name chosen in the end was Grace. A wry McQuarrie touch, perhaps, recognising the character's lack thereof in her attempts to extricate herself from Ethan Hunt ("She's inconsistent," says Atwell. "She's an agent of chaos"), but also to acknowledge the actor's grace under fire as she handled everything they could throw at her with aplomb. Including a car chase driving through the streets of Rome at speed in "this fucking Fiat we nicknamed Tricksy because she had a mind of her own," adds Atwell, who trained for months to nail the precision required to drift around Rome and not kill the world's biggest movie star. "Tom would often say, 'Don't be safe, be competent,' and that was a great mantra for me."

As for Cruise, he's a man who's been at the centre of a car chase or ten. With *Jack Reacher*, he and McQuarrie, in their first film as star and director, knocked out an arguable all-timer. So, how do you take the humble car chase and improve it? "First of all, you do it handcuffed," says Cruise. "I only have one hand drifting. And most of it is a two-shot, so it's really the two of us together. It's not green-screen. This is happening right there." Yep, that oughta do it.

TRAINING DAY

At one point in the film, Ethan and Grace and their villainous counterparts find themselves doing battle in, and on, an old-fashioned locomotive. The sequence started shooting in Norway and then continued at a private railway in Yorkshire. McQuarrie and Cruise like to keep things fluid. Ask people what it is about the shoot that kept it going so long, and they'll shrug and say, 'It's *Mission*!' as if that explains everything. To be fair, it usually does. "You always go back and forth between the beginning and the end of the movie," says Pom Klementieff, whose first day of filming saw her run on top of the train. "They're always checking what they have, and then we do reshoots within the shoot."

Vanessa Kirby, returning as The White Widow, is a proponent of this way of working. There are shots in certain scenes in *Part One* that were filmed at least a year apart. "We were shooting in a train carriage," says Kirby. "And because of Covid we had moved on from that location, and then we realised we needed to get something else to tie in. We even came back a couple of months ago to that scene. It's cool that you know that it will be the best version, and that they don't stop until they get it."

A train chase, and crash, was something of a bucket-list item for McQuarrie, who worships at the feet of John Frankenheimer's muscular 1964 thriller *The Train*, but be careful what you wish for. "Because it's *Mission*, it snowballed into something so vast and so complex, and challenged us on every single level," says McQuarrie. "Physically, emotionally, technically, and we just leaned into it." Or, if you're Cruise, you do more than lean into it. You run around on it. You jump from it. You hang off it as part of its carcass crashes into a river hundreds of feet below. "There's stuff on that train that you just can't get unless you do it this way," says Cruise. "It was challenging, with the speeds, with what we were doing. It was wild. But we're looking for life and immediacy and engagement and storytelling." All aboard.



GETTING INTO CHARACTER

Mission racks up the air miles as much as any franchise (yes, even Bond). But things settled down for a while at Longcross Film Studios. Ving Rhames, whose return as tech genius Luther Stickell makes him the only other actor besides Cruise to have appeared in every single *Mission*, shot all of his scenes there. Of course, his experiences on these movies are a tad more sedate than Cruise's. "There's action," says Rhames (although he's on keyboard duty as usual), "but it's also about human relationships. If the audience doesn't care about the characters, I don't care how much action you have — the film probably doesn't work."

McQuarrie is very much on that same page. His avowed aim was to make *Dead Reckoning* (Both Parts) the most emotional *Mission* movies to date, ramping up the pressure on Ethan Hunt's relationships with Ilsa Faust, with his IMF buddies, and with his own past, personified by the threat of Esai Morales' bad guy Gabriel and the eagerly awaited return of Henry Czerny as stick-in-the-mud spymaster Eugene Kittridge, last seen all the way back in Brian De Palma's 1996 original. "I'm just thrilled," says Czerny, an amiable dude who's as far removed from the uptight Kittridge as you could get without venturing into Lebowski territory. "It was a beautiful surprise. And I love their dynamic. Clearly, Ethan is the hero, but Kittridge is the bureaucracy that we're all suffering through." Perhaps this time, Kittridge *will* get to see Ethan very upset.

For McQuarrie, the key to unlocking Ethan's emotion lay in the mythology that underpins the







Clockwise from main: A horse? Pfft, easy-peasy; Car trouble for Atwell's Grace and Hunt; Pom Klementieff embraces her inner villain; Atwell, Klementieff, Vanessa Kirby and McQuarrie on set.

entire *Mission* franchise. "We've honed in on the notions of choice and acceptance," he says. "The very mantra, 'Should you choose to accept,' has become a touchstone for both of these movies. And choice and acceptance are things with which the characters are constantly confronted. And how each of them deals with choice and how each of them deals with acceptance is played upon throughout the story, particularly for Ethan. Those concepts echo throughout both movies, and in ways you will not expect."

THE FINAL DAY

It's not a competition, by any means, but the staccato nature of shooting has meant that pretty much every single member of the *Dead Reckoning* cast has been wrapped more than once. "I'm waiting for them to say, 'We need one extra day!'" laughs Ferguson. The record, though, belongs to Hayley Atwell. "I was wrapped nine times," she smiles. "It became sort of a running gag." You sense that Cruise would probably pip her to the post, but for one thing. "I haven't wrapped yet," he laughs. "I never wrapped. I never wrap on any of these films. Never." Technically, that means he's still filming *Mission: Impossible*. He might be in for a hefty slab of overtime.

It seems pretty safe to say, though, that Cruise *has* wrapped — finally — on *Dead Reckoning Part One*. Everyone has, in fact. Because as of Friday 28 April, when McQuarrie and crew and Cruise reassembled at Longcross to shoot a freshly written scene ahead of the movie's final test screening, *Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning Part One* has finally finished shooting.

For McQuarrie, this scene would smooth a slight bump in the film's plot. But it called for the creation of a brand-new character, and the hiring of one final actor. He called his casting director, and was sent a bunch of CVs and headshots. One stood out in particular: a former *EastEnders* actor called Alex James Phelps. "A. Jim Phelps," recounts McQuarrie, still tickled by it. Jim Phelps, in case you don't recall, is the name of the lead of the *Mission: Impossible* TV show, who was controversially turned into a villain for the 1996 movie.

"How good is that?" grins Cruise, when *Empire* asks him about working with another Jim Phelps after all these years. Did he see it as a good omen? "I'm not superstitious, but I'll take it! I believe we make our own luck, you know? But it can't hurt."

THE NEXT MISSION

McQuarrie and Cruise have something of a tradition, going back a few years now. Whenever they publicly screen a movie for the first time (test screenings not included), as the credits roll Cruise will lean over to McQuarrie and tell him, "We can do better." "He knows it's true," says Cruise. "The stuff that McQ is doing now? He's just laying it down. Since I was a young actor, people go, 'Well, what do you do next?' There's always another mountain to climb. Always."

The next mountain is in the shape of the next Mission: *Dead Reckoning Part Two*, 40 per cent of which is already in the can after the company decamped to South Africa and the Arctic — yes, the actual Arctic — once principal photography had wrapped (for the first time) on *Part One*. The shoot in South Africa involved a brand-new episode of 'Remember When We Told You Tom Cruise's Last Stunt Was The Most Dangerous Of His Career? Holy Shit, Wait Until You See This'. "Tom and I are always trying to get the big shit out of the way first," says McQuarrie. "South Africa was intense. The aerial sequence is..." And, for once, the most verbose man in Hollywood bites his tongue. "It's just outrageous. I'm so excited about what's coming in *Part Two*. The thing to remember as you're watching this monster is that another monster waits behind it."

And so, when Cruise leans over to him at the first public screening of *Dead Reckoning Part One*, McQuarrie will be ready and waiting for him. "I said to Tom very recently, 'When this is over, I know what you're gonna say to me,'" says McQuarrie with a grin. "'And before you can get a word out, I'm gonna say we already did.'"

And, with just 60 per cent to go, and a year in which to get it, it should be more straightforward than *Part One*. Bar the minor issue of the writers' strike, of course, which has stopped McQuarrie in his tracks. "It's unrelenting," he sighs. "Behind each tsunami is another tsunami. We live in a state of 24-hour tsunami awareness. That's just what we do." In other words: it's *Mission*.

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — DEAD RECKONING PART ONE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 11 JULY

ONE FRAME AT A TIME

PORTFOLIO
SHAYAN ASGHARNIA

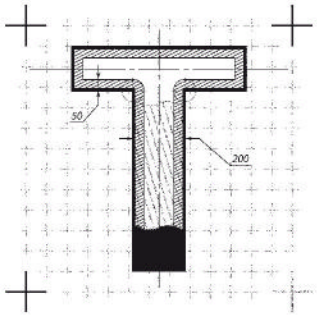
LAIKA ISN'T JUST A STUDIO. IT'S A WAY OF LIFE. AS THE MASTERS OF STOP-MOTION ANIMATION PAINSTAKINGLY PUT TOGETHER THEIR BIGGEST PROJECT YET, WE VISIT THEIR PORTLAND HQ TO DISCOVER THEIR SLOW-MOVING SECRETS

WORDS
NICK DE SEMLYEN



Travis Knight, photographed exclusively for *Empire* at Laika Studios, Portland, Oregon, on 4 April 2023.





The dogfight was going to look awesome. The boy was sure of it. Buzzing from the movies he had sat through, enthralled, on Saturday-morning TV or at cinema matinées in his farm town outside of Portland, Oregon — stop-motion classics such as the Ray Harryhausen-enhanced *The 7th Voyage Of Sinbad* and Rankin/Bass' *Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer* — he had already attempted to inject life into *Star Wars* action figures. Now, it was time for something a little more spectacular. He marched to his X-wing toy, like a titchy Wedge Antilles, grasped it in his eager hands and proceeded to film it, frame by frame, soaring through the sky, little explosions created using balls of cotton. His mind boggled at how incredible it was going to look when he unveiled his final cut.

"Well, it looked like garbage," laughs Travis Knight now. "I was like, 'I'm going to have this amazing aerial battle here!' It was so fun to imagine what it could be. And then you see the end result, and it wasn't what you imagined. So that was heartbreaking."

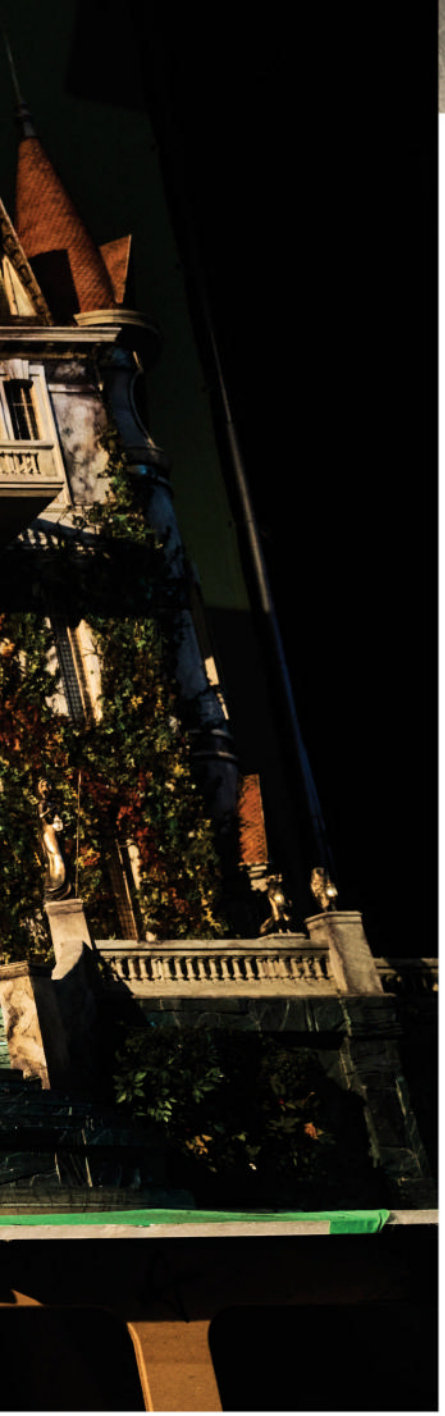
Flash-forward some 40-odd years, and Knight is still tinkering with his toys. He's still just outside Portland, Oregon. Except now those toys are no longer purchased from the nearest Walmart. And rather than his parents' basement, all alone, he's in a giant warehouse complex, assisted by roughly 400 ridiculously talented people. This is Laika, the studio behind the likes of *Coraline*, *ParaNorman* and *Kubo And The Two Strings*: 964 miles up the coast from Hollywood but light years away in terms of how things are done. No sequels. No chatter about "IP". Productions that are not rushed through the system like fast-food, but baked like gourmet dishes in a clay oven. Their new stop-motion epic, *Wildwood*, has been in development for 12 years; it's finally due out in 2025.

It's not always been smooth sailing here, but this is still a place where dreams come true. Very, very slowly.

"I have a big aerial dogfight scene in this movie, with a giant bird," smiles Knight. "So, you know, good things come to pass."

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There's a go-kart track around the corner from Laika, called K1 Speed. Every now and again,













Left: Knight with a mansion set built for *Wildwood*, inspired by a real location in Portland. **Right, top to bottom:** Team Laika do their stop-motion thing.

Below: Coraline clambers through an enchanted portal in Laika's first feature film.

somebody from the studio will head there, clamber inside a buggy and hit the throttle, hard. Whizzing around a circuit at high velocity is a form of recalibration. Because at Laika, despite the presence of an in-studio coffee shop called Dripster's (named after a location in *Wildwood*), things move at, well, puppet pace.

When *Empire* visits the studio in early April, it proves to be the quietest set visit, by far, that we've ever experienced. The usual sounds of a busy shoot — walkie-talkies, clapperboards, Michael Bay yelling at a grip — are absent. In fact, it's hard to detect any activity at all. But as we stroll around the hushed, 400,000-square-foot warehouse complex, we find incredible things happening behind curtains. A massive eagle, wings outspread. A study, complete with marble fireplace and grand piano, the dwelling of an oversized owl. Forest tableaux with tangled trees and creeping ivy. All in miniature, and precisely put together by hand or using nifty tech: even the tiny leaves for the foliage have been laser-cut.

And rather than a bustling crew gathered around the camera on each micro-set, there's just a single, hyper-focused person. "Until we shout action, you'll have set dressers, cameramen, motion control, lighting, gaffer and somebody from Puppets doing final checks," says Laika's Dan Pascall. "But as soon as we get launched, everyone's out and then the animator's in there. I mean, for a 20- or 30-second shot they can be in here for months on their own. It's a pretty solitary thing."

Wildwood is a fantasy epic directed by Knight, based on a book by Colin Meloy, frontman of the band The Decemberists. It's a sprawling tale that's actually set in and around Portland, in which a young woman, Prue McKeel, finds herself in an enchanted forest world. On the day of *Empire*'s visit, there are 25 animators working on the project. But those animators are hidden away and silent, like monks in prayer, rapt in focus over the tiniest of details. When we encounter Jason Stalman, who's worked on Laika productions since 2012's *ParaNorman*, he's attending to a throne room the size of Prince George, concentrating on the puppet of a female character who is reacting to something in the scene.

"She's doing very little, but you have to keep the character alive," he explains. "She's trying to be alluring, so she's doing all these little movements and body adjustments, which is really hard to do." Another challenge is her dress, which has to move independently too. The solution: tiny foam pads beneath the dress, to which the fabric can be pinned to, creating — eventually — the illusion of a swishing, real-looking costume.

Creating a performance frame by frame requires an enormous amount of mental energy. "It's strange; it takes you a minute to come back to the normal world after you've done a day of this," admits Stalman. "People could think, 'How the hell do you do it? It's so boring.' But I like it, because the world is so crazy and fast. This feels nice, to do this little, delicate thing."

One animator at Laika is likely to, in a week, create approximately three-and-a-half seconds of screentime. That's the kind of stat that might ›

prompt some studio executives to kick over a watercooler in frustration. But Knight knows from experience that you can't rush these things. Puppets move at their own tempo.

"You could take shortcuts," he says. "But to me, the film requires whatever it requires. I do think making a movie like this is stupid. It's the stupidest way to make the movie. It's harder. There's more pain. But I also think there's more joy as well. I'm aware of the ticking of the clock and the mortal coil and everything else. I do want to tell as many stories as I can before my time is done. But when this group of people come together to create something, it's the most satisfying thing I've ever been a part of."

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Back in 2009, stop-motion was on life-support (quite possibly hooked up to a tiny, hand-crafted IV). Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* had made its money back a few years earlier, but nobody in Hollywood was baying for more. And advances in CG animation had led to studios looking for the next *Shrek*, not the next *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. "Stop-motion has always been the red-headed stepchild of animation," says Knight. "And CG could effectively do everything we could do in stop-motion, but better. There was certainly a moment where I think any of us who were practitioners of the craft were asking ourselves, 'Is there a future here?'"

But he, and others, were deeply in love with both the process and vibe of stop-motion. Knight, whose father is Nike magnate Phil Knight (as played recently in *Air* by Ben Affleck), had abandoned plans for a career in finance, deciding to follow that passion, wherever it might lead him. And it led him (after a brief stint as rapper 'Chilly Tee') to Laika — formerly Will Vinton Studios, which Phil Knight acquired in 2002, Travis becoming CEO. Laika is the name of a dog sent into space by the Soviet Union in the 1950s; Knight's career choice seemed as daunting an odyssey as that of the cosmic pooch.

Especially when the studio embarked on its first feature film, *Coraline*, directed by *The Nightmare Before Christmas*' Henry Selick and on which Knight worked as lead animator. Not only were financiers reluctant to back a stop-motion animation, but they proved unenthusiastic about the lead character being female — and not a Disney princess, but a regular teenage girl. Despite it being based on a book by Neil Gaiman, despite Selick's pedigree, despite the stunning visuals that Laika were orchestrating, the mood was grim. "There was a lot of anxiety," remembers Knight. "When we were trying to find partners who understood what we were trying to do, we were getting nothing but rejection. It was like high school all over again."

Then, at the premiere the weekend before it came out, a studio executive approached him. "According to the data it was going to bomb tremendously. And I remember an exec put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'I'm sorry. You gave it your best shot.' In this moment where we're trying to have this big celebration of what the crew had created, it was just tainted by this fact that it didn't work, and we were going to fail."













Above: *Coraline* (2009), set in Oregon (plus a parallel universe), was Laika's breakthrough hit, despite there being a battle to get it financed. **Right:** *ParaNorman* (2012) saw its kid hero face a horde of zombies, and featured mainstream animation's first openly gay character.

But it did work: after a surprisingly strong opening weekend, *Coraline* found legs, going on to make $125 million. "Fast-forward a couple of months from the premiere, and that same executive team was asking me to make 'Coraline 2'," Knight recalls. "I was like, 'No, we're not gonna make Coraline 2. We're gonna tell a different story.'"

Laika were off and running. Their follow-up, 2012's *ParaNorman*, was a zesty zombie comedy. 2014's *The Boxtrolls* was a raucous romp featuring mischievous creatures and industrial quantities of cheese. 2016's *Kubo And The Two Strings*, Knight's directorial debut, was an elegiac stop-motion samurai epic. And 2019's *Missing Link* was a massively fun riff on *Around The World In 80 Days*, with a male Sasquatch named Susan. The studio's fare has remained artisanal, original and eccentric. And while the box-office figures have not been astronomical, those who do see their films tend to treasure them. In fact, some viewers became so inspired that they've ended up as employees at Laika themselves.

"There are people who saw *ParaNorman* who work here now," says the studio's head of production, Arianne Sutner. "Same thing with *Coraline*. You know, we don't make tons and tons of stuff, but what we have has a special impact. People love it for all of its unusualness."







Above: Based on the Alan Snow novel *Here Be Monsters!*, *The Boxtrolls* (2014) is a madcap adventure set in the town Cheesebridge. As Gouda as it gets. **Right:** The Travis Knight-directed *Kubo And The Two Strings* counts Akira Kurosawa and David Lean among its influences.













Above: Chris Butler's *Missing Link* (2019) sees furry beast Mr Link, aka Susan (Zach Galifianakis), team up with explorer Sir Lionel Frost (Hugh Jackman) for a globe-trotting adventure. Within Laika, Mr Link was affectionately nicknamed 'Hairy Avocado'.

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In Laika's 'Story Room', where *Empire* meets Knight, bookshelves teem with thick volumes: subjects include P.T. Barnum, Art Deco, Cape Cod houses and fashions of the Victorian age. In a cabinet, meanwhile, are DVDs, many of which seem like unusual references for an animated adventure: the documentary *Fires Of Kuwait*, *The Lord Of The Rings*, *The Birds*, *Michael Clayton*, Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmaster*.

"*The Grandmaster* is a beautiful film," Knight enthuses. "That was a huge inspiration when I was working on *Kubo*, because of how gorgeously it was shot. *Michael Clayton* is more to do with lighting and composition, that sort of thing. But yeah, we pluck inspiration from a variety of sources."

The stop-motion process is intrinsically difficult and time-consuming: boxes of replacement faces (each bearing a unique code) are trolleyed to set to create every smile, smirk and splutter. Nine 3D printers work overtime to make moulds of characters, which are then dressed with bespoke costumes, fitted with wigs and prepared for their moment in the spotlight. The quantities required are mind-boggling: *Missing Link* called for 106,000 unique faces; *Wildwood* will have far more, while also boasting 120 sets, double the number built for *Kubo*.

But Laika is determined to keep crashing through the technical obstacles encountered, in a quest to become ever more cinematic. For *Kubo*, the studio tackled water, a giant skeleton and origami animation. For *Wildwood*, Knight is thinking bigger. He has the benefit of being fresh off his first live-action venture as director, 2018's *Bumblebee*, the best film in the *Transformers* franchise to date. And he's brought on cinematographer Caleb Deschanel, veteran of such non-puppety epics as *The Right Stuff* and *The Patriot*. With the rest of the team, they're making innovations both large and small. They've cracked a way to put muscles into puppets' ›













Opposite: Knight with a wall of puppet faces. **Left, top to bottom:** Glimpses of Laika at work, including the studio's equivalent of an E.R. **Bottom:** A puppet with a puppet in *Kubo And The Two Strings*. Whoa, meta!

arms ("We've never done that before," says Knight. "It looks amazing when I see it on-screen") and to create a fully articulated rat puppet so minuscule that it can rest on your pinkie ("The joints are so small — if you drop it, it looks like a human hair").

Most dauntingly, they are orchestrating a vast battle sequence, which could make *Jason And The Argonauts*' skeleton brawl look like a pub barney. "It's the single most difficult thing we're tackling on this movie," says Knight. "We're starting to chip away and tentatively stepping into, like, 'Oh God, oh God, oh God, how are we gonna do this?' But I think it's going to work. And you'll tell me when the film's all done if it did. Stop-motion films tend to look like they're shot on a table-top, because they are. Moving a physical object a frame at a time and trying to give it life, that's its own challenge. And then you bring all the kineticism you would have in a live-action action movie... It's so hard."

Spectacle is one thing. But Laika's filmmakers are equally focused on their characters. Hailed for their progressiveness and inclusivity, they have brought the world Coraline Jones, a female animated hero like no other. *ParaNorman*'s Mitch (voiced by Casey Affleck) was mainstream cinema's first openly gay animated character, leading to Laika being nominated for a GLAAD award. And they're determined for *Wildwood*'s characters, including Prue, another young female hero, to connect powerfully with viewers.

To create nuanced puppet performances, Laika animators study live-action ones. "There's a moment in *Dangerous Liaisons* with Glenn Close on a sofa, and John Malkovich is asking her, 'What's your story?'" says Jason Stalman of a touchstone for the scene he's animating today. "The way she delivers her lines — I'm getting the shivers — I reacted so much to that that I thought if I could even get one tiny piece of stardust from that and put it into this, I'm going to try. It's nice to show a thought process happening in a two-inch piece of plastic head."

The animators also study themselves. Study their colleagues. And even study their own families.

"The design of the little baby in *Wildwood* is actually based on my nine-year-old son. That's how long we've been developing this damn thing," reveals Knight. "But he's voiced by my two-year-old son. It's a really strange thing to hear that little guy's voice come out of my older guy's puppet body. There's a scene in the film that's incredibly intense and the baby's screaming and crying and people go, 'Oh my God, how did you get that baby to do that?' I'm like, 'Well, I changed his diaper.'"

+++

2023 makes the 125th anniversary of the very first stop-motion film ever created: 1898's *The Humpty Dumpty Circus*, in which dolls of circus acrobats, elephants and donkeys came to life. That historical artifact has been lost forever, but the artform itself has refused to follow suit. Last year saw Guillermo del Toro venture into stop-motion with *Pinocchio* and Henry Selick return with *Wendell & Wild*. Aardman recently teamed up with Lucasfilm for a stop-motion *Star Wars: Visions* short (like Travis Knight's childhood film, it features an X-wing, plus actual Wedge Antilles), while a *Chicken Run* sequel is clucking its way to Netflix.

Much of the credit for the re-animation of stop-motion must go to Laika. They've kept on ploughing forward, dedicated to the medium. The studio is expanding and transforming, with Laika set to move into the live-action realm. The first of those projects will be *Seventeen*, based on a John Brownlow book about the world's most lethal hitman. "It's a thriller with soul," says Knight. "Whatever we're developing, be it animation or live-action, it's going to be something that's emotionally resonant, that blends darkness and light and humour and heart." But at the core of the studio, despite the fact they've incorporated elements of CG into their films since the start, will remain those patience-testing puppets.

While *Wildwood* is their biggest, most ambitious project yet, they're rolling other dice even before that's out. Including *The Night Gardener*, a stop-motion movie based on a script by Bill Dubuque, creator of *Ozark*, and described as a "neo-noir folk tale", which is Laika's first that's not for kids. "This film is not a family film, at all," Knight says. "There's never been a film made like this in our medium. And that really excites me. It's a beautiful story, it scares me, and it's going to be an extraordinary piece of cinema, I think. Or at least has the potential to be."

The Laika philosophy is an admirable one: keep pushing in new directions, never repeat yourself. But one thing remains consistent for these pioneers in the drizzly Pacific Northwest. The pain of making one of these damn films, and the pleasure of — finally — watching the results.

"You know, these things are like little vampires," Knight reflects of the puppets that fill his warehouse. "They suck the life out of the people that touch them. At times, it's really frustrating — they won't do what you want them to do. But when I see a puppet that's been imbued with life, because an animator on a stage has had an emotional connection with an inanimate thing, an assemblage of silicon and steel... Well, it's the closest thing to magic I've ever witnessed."

***WILDWOOD* IS IN CINEMAS IN 2025**



SPECIAL THANKS TO: Animators Jason Stalman, Rachelle Lambden (Character Portraits Set) and Brad Schiff (Archive Legacy Characters Set)





THE FUTURE IS SCARY

ILLUSTRATION **JACEY**

WORDS **ELLEN E JONES**

FOR OVER A DECADE, BLACK MIRROR HAS BEEN SHAKING UP TELEVISION WITH ITS TERRIFYING TECH-INSPIRED VISIONS. WITH A NEW SEASON UPON US, CHARLIE BROOKER TELLS US WHAT *REALLY* SCARES HIM...

Portrait: Michael Wharley









BUILT-IN OBSOLESCENCE is not just for iPhones; it's part of the human condition too. Charlie Brooker has been trying to tell us this for years now, at least since his dystopian, techno-paranoia anthology series first aired on Channel 4 in 2011. Right from the start, *Black Mirror* has blended genres of speculative fiction to spread existential dread, while asking us which parts of humanity's hard-drive are essential to basic functioning, and which should be deleted in the next upgrade.

After making the leap to Netflix in 2016, the show has grown from a cult hit to an Emmy-winning, international TV phenomenon, with the power to make movie stars, direct discourse and even... maybe... *predict the future*? Under such circumstances, the slow fade into cultural irrelevancy would now seem inevitable, but instead the opposite has happened: in the four years since the previous season aired, global events have once again proved its prescience, and had us muttering, "It's like something out of *Black Mirror*," more frequently than ever before.

Now Charlie Brooker is back with five often low-tech, retro-styled new episodes — 'Joan Is Awful', 'Loch Henry' 'Beyond The Sea', 'Mazey Day' and 'Demon 79' — that collectively both upend our notions of what *Black Mirror* is, and could only be *Black Mirror*. Brooker's reputation as Britain's favourite home-grown doomsday prophet is thus assured, and yet in person he makes for an ever-cheerful, open-minded interviewee, willing to chat about matters both trivial and terrifying. Perhaps because in the *Black Mirror* universe, the truth often lies somewhere in-between.

***Black Mirror* is now 12 years and six series in, with a new set of episodes that go harder than ever before. How have you avoided jumping the shark, selling out and otherwise losing your edge?**

Well, I don't know. Some people would say otherwise, but it's objective — subjective? Or objective? I always get those two mixed up, which is terrible for a writer. But when I started writing this season it was mid-2021, we were in the tail-end of the pandemic, and I remember thinking that technology had slightly plateaued. Now everyone's talking about AI constantly, but then there wasn't anything that disruptively new or terrifying that had come along. And also, at the same time, I was aware that I had written lots of episodes where someone's got a little nubbin on their temple, and they wake up and go, "Oh, I was inside a computer the whole time!" So I thought, "I'm just going to chuck out any sense of what I think a *Black Mirror* episode is." There's no point in having an anthology show if you can't break your own rules. Just a sort of nice, cold glass of water in the face.

Are you scared about robots stealing your job?

Not my job, specifically. I've toyed around with ChatGPT a bit. The first thing I did was type "generate *Black Mirror* episode" and it comes up with something that, at first glance, reads plausibly, but on second glance, is shit. Because all it's done is look up all the synopses of *Black Mirror* episodes, and sort of mush them together. Then if you dig a bit more deeply you go, "Oh, there's not actually any real original thought here." It's [1970s impressionist] Mike Yarwood — there's a topical reference.

Have you reflected on the catastrophising thing and why we do it?

Oh, yeah. Yes, I'll definitely jump five lily-pads from like, if one of the kids has got a cough, then I'm through to, "They're gonna die." It doesn't take me long, which is useful sometimes in coming up with *Black Mirror* stories, but obviously *not* great if you're trying to just go about your daily business. And the worrying thing is that sometimes I've been onto something... Like I remember, when Trump





Clockwise from main: Kate Mara and Aaron Paul in 'Beyond The Sea'; Charlie Brooker on the set of 'Demon 79'; Season 4's 'Metalhead'; Walls have ears? Anjana Vasan in 'Demon 79'; The infamous pig storyline from 2011's 'The National Anthem'.

first came along, thinking, "He is *clearly* going to win," and I'd say this to people, and they'd think I was bonkers. So that gives me pause now, if I start to worry about something. I think I've been right before, so...

You're going to darkly manifest it.
Things like the David Cameron thing felt like that. [2011 *Black Mirror* episode 'The National Anthem' featured a Prime Minister having carnal relations with a pig, preceding a real-life rumour emanating from a 2015 biography]. That actually sent me a bit bonkers for a short period, because I thought, "That *can't* be real! Surely that can't have happened? It's too eerily close." It makes you feel like you're living in a simulation.

How do you feel about your reputation as a doomsday prophet?
I mean, I'll take it because it's handy publicity, but it's also worrisome. Obviously, when you're doing stuff like this, you're really just drawing on things that already exist — moods or tones — and extrapolating. So, there's the [2017] episode 'Metalhead' with robot dogs running around, and people sometimes say, "I see that the New York Police are hiring these Boston Dynamics dogs! That's just like 'Metalhead', isn't it?" Well, no. I'd seen videos of the Boston Dynamics dogs, and that was why I wrote it. I thought, "What if you do *Jaws*, but it was that sort of thing?"

So you're not actually claiming any supernatural abilities, then? ›

I don't think so. But then again — well, this would be a bit of a spoiler, but... [redacted massive Season 6 spoiler]... And while we were filming it, that came back in the news and I was really not good. I didn't sleep very well for a week or so, because it doesn't take much for me to ramp up. I think a lot of that comes from growing up as a child of the '80s — I was born in '71 — and watching the Cold War play out on TV, and shitting myself that at any time, everything was gonna get destroyed.

How *do* you think the world is going to end?
[*Laughs*] That's a cheerful question! I don't know. You can get extremely pessimistic about the rise of AI or climate change and if I sit and think about it too much, I get very gloomy and think, "Oh, we'll just end up in a terrible sort of knife-fight over resources on a dying rock." That's basically, probably the answer. But equally, we are quite resourceful, I think that the younger generation that is coming up seems more level-headed. I *think*? I don't know. I wouldn't like to... because what if I predict how the world will end and then I'm manifesting it?

How about a best worst-case scenario?
The Matrix, in a way, would be nice. Like, being stuck in the equivalent of a looping GIF of somebody eating a chocolate eclair, while you're just basically being used for minerals and energy by some sort of sentient robot civilisation. That wouldn't be that bad, would it?

There's this Netflix satire called 'Streamberry' running through this series. Did you ask Netflix's permission?
We just said, "We've got this streaming platform in this episode called 'Streamberry', can we make it look like Netflix?" And they went away and came back quite quickly — I mean, *weirdly* quickly — and said, "Yeah, okay." There wasn't any resistance to it, that I could tell. Which is a bit disappointing, because it would be good to be able to say, "I just did it anyway, because I'm an anarchist!" But no. And that episode 'Joan Is Awful' [about an ordinary woman who discovers her life is the subject of an eerily accurate streaming TV adaptation] is quite meta and weird anyway. It's one thing me watching it in the edit, but the thought that people are going to be watching it on the Netflix platform itself? That's quite bonkers.

Most of the episodes this season are set in some version of the past. Are you saying the past can be just as bad as the future?
It's sort of dystopian past, present *and* future, you could say. Something like 'Beyond The Sea' [starring Aaron Paul, Kate Mara and Josh Hartnett], I had the plot idea first and then, at one point, I thought [*adopts the voice of a TV-making moron*], "What if I set this in the late '60s? That'd be, like, disruptive and cool! Set it in the '60s!" And then when you actually come to write it, you realise, "Oh, hang on, if this is a different time and everyone in it is from that time, that actually informs how the characters are thinking and behaving." But I don't think there was a deliberate rejection of nostalgia, so much as it was just a fun thing to do. Or 'Mazey Day' [starring *Atlanta*'s Zazie Beetz], that's set in the early noughties, just before smartphones really became a thing, when that paparazzi job became a bit more redundant, but also a bit more generalised, and also before we became more sensitive to the fact that celebrities are humans. If you go back and look at that era — I think I'd basically watched the Britney Spears documentary — all of that now seems really brutal and horrible.

Let's talk about the casting on *Black Mirror*, which is always excellent. How does it work from your perspective?
It's a mix. Sometimes you write things and you have someone in mind. Like Annie Murphy was quite quickly in my head as Joan [in 'Joan Is Awful'] because I'd watched *Schitt's Creek* during the pandemic, like everyone else, and she's so naturally funny and likeable. We also have Jina Jay who does our casting, and Jeanie Bacharach in the US, and they're very good at putting in brand-new-to-me people. Actually, I could address something here that bothers me, which is people moaning about *Black Mirror* and going, "I preferred it when it was all unknown Brits." In this season we've got a mix of some very established faces and some people who are newer, probably, to the average viewer. So I slightly reject the accusation. And also I point out that we had Jon Hamm way back when we did 'White Christmas' [2014]. But we do like to alternate what you might class as glossy, American episodes with slightly grungy British ones. And I think we've punched above our weight, in terms of giving people a breakthrough









Far right: A trip to Scotland goes awry for Myha'la Herrold and Samuel Blenkin in 'Loch Henry'; **Right, top to bottom:** Salma Hayek stars in 'Joan Is Awful'; Filming a scene for 'Beyond The Sea'; Brooker always had *Schitt's Creek*'s Annie Murphy in mind for the titular role in 'Joan Is Awful'; Mackenzie Davis and Gugu Mbatha-Raw in 'San Junipero' (2016).



role. The nature of the anthology show is you can give starring roles to someone who is not so well-known.

How do you keep the show unpredictable?
Black Mirror is an interesting trap, because people associate the series with twists and unexpected things. It's difficult to keep doing that. One of the things we can do is completely alter the form of the episodes, or the sort of thing you do in the episodes. A time I've done that before was when we went from Channel 4 to Netflix, and suddenly we're doing six episodes in that season. The first one I wrote for that was [Emmy-winning romance episode starring Gugu Mbatha-Raw and Mackenzie Davis] 'San Junipero' because I thought, "I've got to write a positive one or I'll go fucking mad." If every time I'm just writing a variant on, "Somebody finds themselves in a trap... They are trapped... They are still trapped... The trap door opens and they're in an even bigger trap. The End", I'll go mad.

What happens when we die?
Another cheery question. What do you mean, "What happens when we die?" What do *I* believe happens when we individually die? I'm afraid to say I think we just... go. That's what I think. Obviously, you could argue whether you live on in the ripples of the things that you did in your life, blah, blah, blah. But ultimately, it's frightening to me already how, as you get older, things start to fade away. I was talking to somebody a couple of months ago and I referenced Buster Keaton and the famous stunt with the front of the house that falls over — and this was to somebody who works in television and film, not somebody stupid or who doesn't care — and they had no idea who Buster Keaton was. Like, none whatsoever! And I just thought, "Fucking hell, so Buster Keaton's just passed over the event horizon," or whatever you call it.

It's the second death, isn't it? When no-one remembers you.
Well, there you go. I mean, that's six degrees of Kevin Bacon but even more depressing, isn't it? So any one of us is only ever a second death away from being a fucking sepia photograph that somebody finds in the loft and goes, "I don't know who the fuck that is," and tosses it out. So I think that's what happens to us.

What about *Black Mirror*, though? Could that run and run and run?
Well, there are still lots of ideas. I think if we keep expanding what *Black Mirror* is, then I think it could just keep going and going and going. So yes. I'm hoping the answer is yes.

Has making it changed your relationship with technology? How are you enjoying social media these days?
I tend to lurk a bit and I use it for promotional activity. I don't see much value in getting into arguments and I probably am on it less, just because I just don't think it particularly achieves much. The tone of it all is a little bit 'closing time at the pub', and there's not much fun there anymore. It worries me that it's becoming a sort of hive of misinformation and anger. The fun end of that is the faked image of the Pope in the puffer jacket, but what's going to happen in the next US election? That scares the shit out of me. But at the same time, I do love it. I did the thing once when you set your phone screen to grayscale, so it's less sugary addictive, but it was just annoying after a while. And my kids are massively into videogames, YouTube, all of that stuff, and I feel like I should probably put more limits on screentime. But then equally, if I'm going, "Come on, it's a nice day outside!", what a massive hypocrite! I used to ignore that when I was their age, I'd just think it was nonsense.

And you turned out alright!
Well, I clearly didn't, so I'm in two minds about it.

***BLACK MIRROR* SEASON 6 IS ON NETFLIX FROM 15 JUNE**

CHARLIE BROOKER'S TV NIGHTMARES

BETWEEN 1999 AND 2001, BROOKER PUBLISHED *TVGOHOME*, AN ONLINE COLUMN SPOOFING TV LISTINGS. HERE ARE SOME *BLACK MIRROR*-ESQUE HIGHLIGHTS...

1:40PM
NEIGHBOURS
Phil apologises for his murderous rampage. Madge starts secreting a mysterious orange liquid from her tear ducts.

6:30PM
NIGHTMARE OLYMPICS
New series of malevolent dreamscape athletics. *1. Marathon Of Horror* Athletes with weights on their feet attempt to run through a trench filled with thick glue while a pale skeletal hound with human eyes walks slowly behind them with a menacingly nonchalant gait.

7:30PM FILM PREMIERE
STOP THAT CLOWN!
Manic comedy starring Rick Moranis and Martin Short as a pair of bungling detectives on the trail of a deranged child molester.

9:10PM
BIOKID WARS
Popular series in which teams of amateur scientists pit genetically engineered battlechildren against one another in a ruthless fight to the death. Craig Charles and Philippa Forrester oversee the carnage as Bristol's Tom Claw, the four-year-old with six arms and fearsome talons, takes on Katie-3, the Shirley Temple lookalike with a parakeet's beak laced with Legionnaire's Disease.

10:30PM
TETRIS: THE MOVIE
Dark thriller starring Kevin Costner. Professor David Warburton discovers the source of the tumbling fun to be a shadowy Government bureau, and uncovers the alarming scientific method by which complete rows of blocks mysteriously 'disappear'.

12:00AM
TWO HUNDRED QUID FOR THE FIRST PERSON WHO CAN EAT AN ENTIRE BATHTOWEL ON CAMERA
Self-explanatory late-night game show for the genuinely desperate.

1:00AM
SWITCH ME OFF OR THEY WILL EAT YOU
Four hours of eerie faces and ghostly noises specifically designed to scare any children who might be watching on a portable set in their bedroom.

DOOMSDAY

WITH APOCALYPTIC ATOMIC-BOMB THRILLER OPPENHEIMER, CHRISTOPHER NOLAN BRINGS ONE OF HIS



WORDS
ALEX GODFREY

SCENARIO

ENDURING OBSESSIONS TO THE SCREEN. WE MEET THE DIRECTOR IN LA TO TALK ABOUT GOING NUCLEAR



WE SEE THE LOWER-FIFTH OF CHRISTOPHER NOLAN.



The shoes. A bit of trouser. A small section of Christopher Nolan on the move, glimpsed through the bottom of a windowed wall, the rest blocked out by frosted glass, obscuring him until he's ready.

He stops to talk to someone, but even then, despite hearing his voice, we can't make out the words. So here we sit, waiting for him in a small conference room, seeing and hearing bits of him, unable to piece it all together. It's enigmatic. It's cryptic. It's — dare we say — cinematic. And *very* Christopher Nolan. He just can't help himself.

Yes, for a man who likes his films to pose questions rather than provide answers, who constructs them like puzzles, this all makes sense. It's early May in the Los Angeles post-production facility where his films are taken to the finish line. In rooms and offices there is evidence of an impressive career — framed newspaper cuttings about *The Prestige*, various awards, an *Inception* poster, a Batpod maquette, framed cells from the *Dark Night* trilogy, and film cans containing reels from his latest opus, *Oppenheimer*, a bit of which he's just played for *Empire* in a screening room so loud it felt like an earthquake. As it should — this is a film about the man responsible for the development of the atomic bomb. The footage is, we tell Nolan as he finally appears, unnerving. "I think 'unnerving' is definitely a good word to describe it!" he laughs.

Oppenheimer is his 12th film. All want to screw with your mind a bit, get your pulse racing, leave you thinking, these sweeping epics exploring time, identity, physics, morality, memory. They are thrilling, world-building head-scratchers, the product of a man who, as a kid, fell in love with both *Star Wars* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* a few months apart and then taught himself how to make movies step by step, creatively, practically, technically.





Right: It's a family affair: Kitty Oppenheimer (Emily Blunt, centre) and children. **Below:** Testing times on the test site for Oppenheimer and his team. **Far right:** Blinded by the light, theoretical physicist Edward Teller (Benny Safdie).

Filmmaking has always obsessed him, and his new one has been doing so for longer than he can recall.

"I actually don't remember when I first got hooked by the notion of, you know, they literally thought they might destroy the world," he says casually of *Oppenheimer*, the true story named after the theoretical physicist who, racing against the Nazis in the early 1940s, spearheaded nuclear weaponry for America. There's a reference to this in Nolan's last film, 2020's genre-busting, time-travel-ish thriller *Tenet*, in which arms dealer Priya (Dimple Kapadia) tells John David Washington's CIA operative that as



Bomb proof: Director Christopher Nolan on set.



Oppenheimer's team approached the first atomic test (1945's Trinity test), he "became concerned that the detonation might produce a chain reaction, engulfing the world".

Nolan wasn't planning to make a film about Oppenheimer at that point, but couldn't stop thinking about it: "This idea that these guys did this calculation, and couldn't eliminate the possibility that they'd set fire to the atmosphere and destroy the whole world. But they had to go ahead and do the Trinity test anyway. You can't put the toothpaste back in the tube, which was really what *Tenet* was about. In dealing with that I then became interested in looking at that story, not as analogy for a science-fiction concept, but for its own sake, because it is just so irresistibly dramatic."

Oppenheimer is literally about the end of the world. Or, at least, the potential end of the world. Nolan wanted to be there for it.

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WE CAN, IN PART, BLAME ROBERT Pattinson. Nolan had been interested in Oppenheimer — in his life, his work, his achievements and his political struggles — for a long time. Oppenheimer was one of the world's most brilliant scientists, who questioned his country's motives after World War II, concerned about the development of the hydrogen bomb, and then, via a political witch-hunt, had his security clearance revoked. When *Tenet* wrapped, Pattinson gave Nolan a book of Oppenheimer's speeches — they'd discussed him on set — and Nolan was drawn into the stories of "these people trying to adapt to a new world in which this terrible power exists, and trying to figure out how, geopolitically, the world could deal with it, what the consequence was going to be, when it was absolutely new and fresh".

This led to him reading *American Prometheus*, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherman's exhaustive book on Oppenheimer, which gave Nolan the impetus to undertake more research and write a script. "It's a provocative statement, but I believe it to be true — he's the most important man who ever lived. Whether you like it or not," he laughs.

There is a photograph in *American Prometheus* of Oppenheimer near the end of his life, his piercing blue eyes confronting the camera. He looks haunted, as you might if you were him. *Empire* asks Nolan if his film will be a psychological excavation, but that doesn't seem to be his primary concern. "Really, you have to look at it in terms of story. It's a story of someone who's involved in a very specific and revolutionary turn in the world. He's there at the dawn of quantum physics, quantum mechanics and the incorporation of that, this revolutionary shift in thinking about physics." ›

Nolan does like to bring physics to the multiplexes. It underpins *Inception*, *Interstellar* and *Tenet*. There are sketches he's done to explain what's going on in *Tenet* and *Memento* that look like formulae. The structure of *Dunkirk*, taking in three harmonious but different timespans, always seemingly peaking, was based on a mathematical music principle (the Shepard tone). And with *Oppenheimer* he's doubling down, focusing on one of the world's greatest theoretical physicists — a man "who walked through the door that Einstein opened and completely revolutionised the way we think of reality". Nolan wanted us to get close.

The approach came to him quickly. "For me, everything's about structure and point of view," he says. "I wanted to really go through this story with Oppenheimer; I didn't want to sit by him and judge him. That seemed a pointless exercise. That's more the stuff of documentary, or political theory, or history of science. This is a story that you experience with him — you don't judge him. You are faced with these irreconcilable ethical dilemmas with him."

To really drill into that, Nolan wanted the script to have a completely subjective perspective. "I actually wrote in the first-person, which I've never done before. I don't know if anyone's ever done it before. But the point of it is, with the colour sequences, which is the bulk of the film, everything is told from Oppenheimer's point of view — you're literally kind of looking through his eyes." So hang on — it was all written in the first-person, the descriptions, the directions, all of it? "Yeah. I know," he says. "Odd thing to do. But it was a reminder to me of how to shoot the film. It was a reminder to everybody involved in the project, 'Okay, this is the point of view of every scene.'"

Everybody, but particularly Cillian Murphy. "I put an enormous burden on that central character," says Nolan. "There always would have been a big burden with playing this type of person, but to have to carry the whole audience with them in this very subjective way... That's when I thought of Cillian." Not that he put it to the actor like that. At least, not back then. "Yeah, there was definitely a responsibility. But I'm glad he said that *after* we shot the fucking movie and not before," laughs Murphy now.

Murphy's at home in Dublin when we speak to him. This is his sixth film with Nolan (after three Batmans, an *Inception* and a *Dunkirk*) but his first in the starring role — "the perfect match-up of actor with character", explains Nolan. Oppenheimer, by all accounts, contained multitudes — gregarious at parties while prone to bouts of huge depression; a very moral man but responsible for taking the world towards potential destruction; and a fellow so charismatic that, as a young physicist, quite a few colleagues in his circle would take on his intonations and gestures. And, oh, those piercing blue eyes. Anyway, yes — quite the burden.

Nolan flew to Dublin in September 2021, giving Murphy the script to read; Murphy loved it and the pair discussed it together for the rest of that day. The prospect of playing Oppenheimer was "terrifying and exciting in equal measure", says Murphy. "Which I think is the best place to be as an actor starting off on a project. You can't sit back and think, 'I've got this, this is going to be a piece of piss, I hope the catering is good.' This was like, 'Fuck.' But then it started, this hunger. I could feel this hunger for the character and for the job."







Right: The Oppenheimers comfort one another during difficult times. **Below right:** Lieutenant General Leslie Groves Jr (Matt Damon). **Far right:** Nolan and Murphy prep a scene on set.



Financier and government official Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr) with J. Robert Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy).



It was a lot to take on. "He is this iconic figure, the father of the atomic bomb, the man who stole the fire from the gods," says Murphy, alluding to *American Prometheus*. "He's a divisive character, and he's a very hard, complex character to figure out, kind of unknowable. So that is different than playing a cop who's got scruples in a TV show. Not that those aren't worthy things to make. But this has an added layer to it."

That, though, was just the acting. The filmmaking was going to go even closer.

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EMPIRE ASKS WHAT NOLAN'S biggest challenge was on *Oppenheimer*, and it comes back to that subjectivity. "There's the idea of how we get in somebody's head and see how they were visualising this radical reinvention of physics," he says. So, more than people writing on a window.

"More than people writing on a window. One of the things that cinema has struggled with historically is the representation of intelligence or genius. It very often fails to engage people. The first person I showed the script to when it was finished after [his producer and wife] Emma [Thomas] read it was Andrew Jackson, the visual effects supervisor. I said to him, 'We have to find a way into this guy's head. We've gotta see the world the way he sees it, we've gotta see the atoms moving, we've gotta see the way he's imagining waves of energy, the quantum world. And then we have to see how that translates into the Trinity test. And we have to feel the danger, feel the threat of all this somehow.' My challenge to him was, 'Let's do all these things, but without any computer graphics.'"

The Trinity test, in which Oppenheimer and his team in New Mexico conducted the world's first nuclear detonation, took place on 16 July 1945. Of course Nolan wanted to recreate it without CGI. A lot of filmmakers *talk* about ditching visual effects for practical work, but Nolan goes the distance, again and again, building rotating corridors, smashing up actual cars with an actual train hurtling down an actual street, genuinely crashing a 747 plane, and blowing up football fields. Recreating the Trinity test, though, might be the wildest of the lot.

"I find CG rarely is able to grab you," he reasons. "It tends to feel safe. Even if it's impressive and beautiful, it's difficult to make you feel danger. And we were presenting the ultimate danger. We needed it to feel threatening, nasty and frightening to the audience." With that goal set, Jackson and special effects supervisor Scott Fisher devised various approaches, explains Nolan. "Very experimental approaches, some microscopic and tiny, some on a giant scale using explosives and magnesium flares and big, black powder explosions of petrol, whatever. And then some ›

absolutely tiny, using interactions of different particles, different oils, different liquids. You know. These kinds of things."

What was it like for him — despite having been there for the discussions, the design, the planning — to see this all executed, to be out there in the same New Mexico desert the Trinity test took place in, to see the "giant scale" stuff come to fruition? "I mean, I've done a lot of explosions in a lot of films," he says. "But there *is* something very unique and particular about being out in a desert in the middle of the night with a big cast, and really just doing some *enormous* explosions and capturing that." What did really affect him, though, being there for that, was thinking of what it must have been like for Oppenheimer and his team at the time. "You couldn't help but come back to this moment when they were doing this on the ultimate scale, that in the back of their minds they knew there was this possibility that they would set fire to the atmosphere. It was pretty amazing to engage in that kind of tension."

• • •

ENGAGING IN THAT KIND OF tension seems to have affected Nolan and Murphy, and more than they might have anticipated. Before he made the film, Murphy says he didn't walk around thinking about the nuclear threat too much. "But now, I do think about it an *awful* lot," he says. "It brought home to me just what these guys were doing, and how the world would never be the same again." It's that context, *Empire* suggests to Nolan, that hindsight, that made the footage we saw so unnerving. "Wait 'til you see the film, mate!" he laughs.

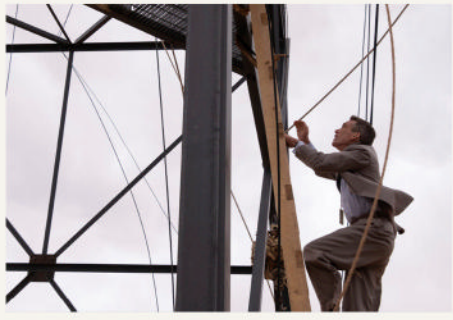
It is notable, though, that in an age where so many blockbusters are fictional, fantastical stories about super-powered villains trying to destroy the world, Nolan has just filmed a true story about real people making something that might destroy the world. "Look, the ultimate stakes of any big blockbuster is the survival of the world," he nods. "And that's what this story is. I know of no story with higher stakes than Oppenheimer's story. That's just the truth of it. It's tricky using a word like entertainment when you're talking about something so serious, but entertainment in movies takes many forms. This is such an involving, compelling tale that we had the privilege of telling, really. On that level, I've really enjoyed it. But there have been times where, yeah, it *is* unnerving, and a sense of despair can set in."

And that happened? "Yeah, very much. Very much." He emphasises that the film contains "a great adventure, a great love story, it has espionage, thriller elements, and all the rest", but also sometimes feels, yes, "despairing".

Murphy gazes off, thinking silently for quite a few seconds, before discussing how the material affected him. "It has definitely stayed with me. It really has stayed with me," he says.







Right: Man on a witch-hunt mission: Strauss is determined to ruin Oppenheimer's reputation. **Below right:** The physicist hits new heights. **Far right:** Oppenheimer tries to avoid the media's gaze.

"I'm a pretty positive, optimistic person, generally, and in the work environment, it doesn't help anybody to be going around with your knapsack of doom." Nevertheless, he says, he couldn't help but dwell on the film's themes on set, and it weighed heavy on him.

"I don't know if it's healthy to walk around thinking about it *all* the time. I certainly don't know if I have the intellectual or emotional capacity for that. But maybe these men did. Many people spoke about Oppenheimer as being the most brilliant of them all. I think that intellect... *that* becomes a burden, because it's like you have access to a different dimension in your thinking. And if you're



Oppenheimer hits the desert.



in that dimension all the time, that must be really hard on your personal life."

• • •

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S FILMS aren't obviously personal. But his preoccupations are, remaining constant even as the films have generally got bigger, in terms of subject matter and scope. "To be that close to him working over all these years and see his voice develop, and the types of stories that he wants to tell develop — that's been fascinating to watch," says Murphy.

The director himself has little time for such contextualising. "It's funny... They did a showreel for me and Emma at CinemaCon," he says of the Las Vegas event in April, at which the pair were given the NATO Spirit Of The Industry award. "Weirdly they used *all* of our films, and in a funny sort of way they all looked like they were part of the same film," he says. His concerns over the years, he recognised, were often similar. "As far as the changes in the craft, the changes in the storytelling, yeah, you like to think that you're developing in some way, but for me to be self-conscious about that would be absurd. Absurd and reductive!" He laughs. "I'm not one of those filmmakers that looks back at what I've done in the past and goes, 'Oh, I fucked that up, I should have done that differently.' That's not the way I look at what I'm trying to do." He just wants his films to pose interesting questions, he says.

Surely, though, the filmmaking has changed as he himself has changed. It's 25 years since his 1998 debut *Following* was released ("Blimey. Sounds like a long time when you say it out loud"), and inevitably there's an evolution, life and art feeding into each other. Yes, he says, but that's a largely unconscious process.

"I've always worked in genres that are pretty far removed from my own life, right? But I absolutely see my life and its evolutionary points through that, from *Following*, which is about a lonely wannabe writer in London, to... I remember when I was writing *Inception*, I would look out my office window and see my little kids playing on the grass, so I thought I'd stick that in the film. So I have seen those things. The fact that there is some relationship with my growth or evolution as a person, being older, getting married, having kids, now my kids getting older and leaving... What it tells me that I like is that I'm trying to write from an honest perspective, even if I'm writing a science-fiction film, or a thriller, or a superhero film."

Or a film about a theoretical physicist who developed a weapon that could destroy the world. Murphy saw it recently and is still shuddering. "I think it's a truly essential cinematic experience," he says. "And I *know* that's what I'm supposed to say, that's the studio line. But you *have* to see this in the cinema on the biggest fucking screen possible. There are moments in it that will *blow* people's *lids* off."

Counting down.

OPPENHEIMER IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 JULY

THE DEEP DIVE

IN OUR REGULAR SERIES, WE EXPLORE A SLICE OF CINEMA LORE

THIS MONTH:

The First Academy Awards



WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

ILLUSTRATION **THE RED DRESS**

LOUIS B. MAYER HAD A PROBLEM.

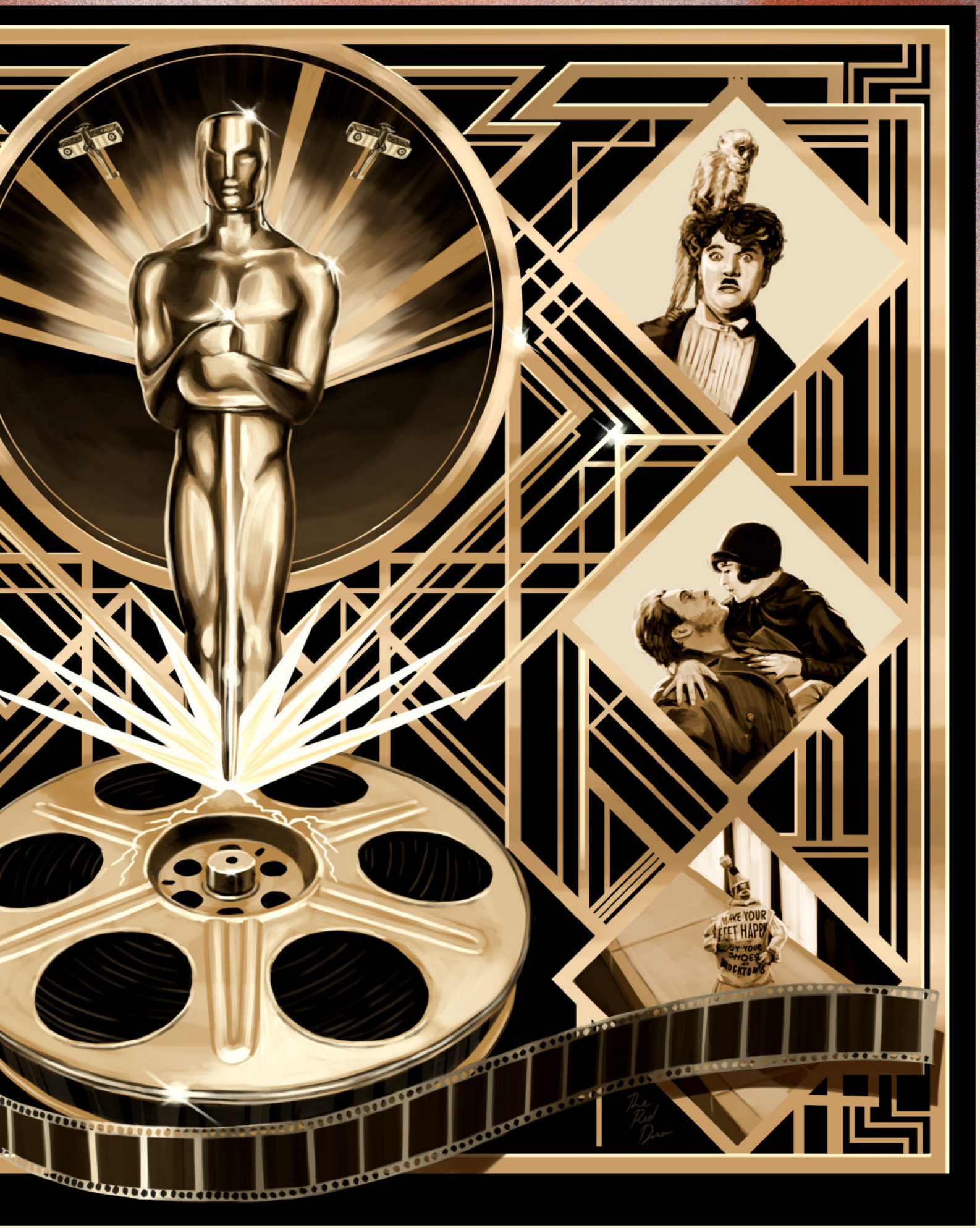
As the head of MGM Studios, the stocky, bespectacled mogul had long been one of the richest and most powerful men in Hollywood — but by the mid-1920s he was beginning to recognise a pair of looming threats to his livelihood.

The first was unionisation. A staunch capitalist, Mayer had been troubled by the signing, in 1926, of an industry-wide agreement to negotiate wages, benefits and working conditions for film-studio labourers. How long, he wondered, before the actors, writers and directors got the same idea, and started clamouring for pensions, healthcare and a bigger slice of the profits?

Mayer's other issue was image. The first half of the 'Roaring Twenties' had seen the motion-picture industry's reputation take a catastrophic nosedive. Beginning in 1920 with the fatal drug overdose of actress Olive Thomas, and snowballing the following year with slapstick star 'Fatty' Arbuckle's trial for rape and manslaughter, the scandals had come thick and fast, tarnishing many of Tinseltown's biggest names. The press lapped it up, churning out hysterical tales of Hollywood debauchery, and across the Prohibition-era US, Protestant ministers condemned the depravity of 'Sin City' to their congregations. It all spelled trouble for the industry and — by extension — Louis B. Mayer.

Fortunately, he was a problem-solver — a two-birds-one-stone kind of guy — and he set about fixing both his worries at once. What he needed was a way to placate the creative talent, without giving up a sizeable chunk of the studio's earnings, while at the same time cleaning up Hollywood's image. Rebranding 'Sin City' as something more distinguished and legitimate.

As an impoverished kid in Canada, Mayer had spent his pre-teen years collecting scrap metal to sell for cash. Trudging home every day, he would pass a luxurious hotel ›


MAKE YOUR
FEET HAPPY
BUY YOUR
SHOES
AT
BROCKTON'S





dining room, all silver candlesticks and flamingo-pink lampshades. He'd vowed one day to get rich, stride in, and order a slap-up meal. It had never happened (he got rich, but by the time he returned, the hotel had been torn down), but the experience had left him with a taste for glitz and glamour, pomp and ceremony. Maybe a little pomp and ceremony was what he needed now.

It was from these rather dubious intentions that the Academy Awards were born. Held on 16 May 1929, the inaugural event showed no signs that it would one day become the most illustrious in all showbusiness. In fact, it was a ramshackle affair: groundbreaking in many ways, shambolic in just as many others. And it all sprang from one man's desire to control the very people he was honouring. "I found that the best way to handle [filmmakers] was to hang medals all over them," Mayer would recall, years later. "If I got them cups and awards, they'd kill themselves to produce what I wanted. That's why the Academy Award was created."

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IT HAD ALL BEGUN WITH A BEACH HOUSE.

In the 1920s, anyone who was anyone in Hollywood owned a villa on the Santa Monica coast. Dubbed 'Rolls Royce Row', the strip was home to the cream of Tinseltown, from screen icons like Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford to pioneering producers such as Jesse Lasky. And Louis B. Mayer wanted in.

So, in the spring of 1926, he began recruiting MGM stagehands to knock him up a swanky holiday home in-between building his movie sets. To his horror, however, he learned that this elastic approach to overtime would no longer be tolerated: the industry's carpenters, electricians and painters were in the process of unionising. Despite being Russian, Mayer was not too keen on workers of the world uniting. His family had fled the Tsarist Empire for Canada when he was just three. By the time Lenin's Bolsheviks were storming the Winter Palace in 1917, Mayer was en route to conquering Hollywood and appalled

Inset, top left: Academy founders Louis B. Mayer (fourth from right), Cecil B. DeMille (far left) and Fred Niblo (far right). **Main:** The first Academy Awards take place in the Blossom Room of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, in 1929.

at the communism of his homeland. He was, as one biographer put it, "a testament to the American Dream" — a poor, uneducated immigrant who got beach-house-rich in the land of the free — and the thought of socialist ideals infiltrating his industry terrified him.

He wasn't alone. Many top producers and studio heads were equally spooked by the prospect of the 'creative' talent following the stagehands into unions. So by the time Mayer's beach house was finished (in just six weeks, using good old unregulated labour), he invited a few other big cheeses round to float an idea. Over cards and cigars, Mayer suggested forming a "mutually beneficial" organisation that would appear to act for all parties in the motion-picture





Far left: The Last Command star Emil Jannings, winner of the first Best Actor award, would return home to Germany and assist in making Nazi propaganda during World War II. **Left:** Clara Bow's Wings secured the first Outstanding Picture gong.

industry. Ostensibly democratic (yet, in reality, heavily weighted towards the studios), this group would settle employment disputes without the need for those pesky unions, as well as acting as a PR machine to combat the wave of Hollywood scandals still being plastered all over the papers.

Word was spread, and by early 1927, the fledgling organisation had 36 founder members, comprised of Hollywood's foremost actors, directors, writers and (mainly) producers. It also had a name: the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Some members — such as United Artists president Joseph Schenck — found the title of 'Academy' "too lofty". For others, like legendary producer-director Cecil B. DeMille, its loftiness was entirely fitting. "The world is more influenced by the little group in this room tonight than by any other power in the world," he told his fellow academicians at their first meeting. "There was a little group like this that gathered in another little room," he added, "and the result was the United States of America."

One of the Academy's functions, it was decided, would be to hand out "awards of merit for distinctive achievements". This would quell any rumblings of unionisation by — to quote film historian Neal Gabler — "striking filmmakers where they were most vulnerable — their vanity". But it would also help spring-clean the stained reputation of Hollywood's stars. After all, how could these people be the debauched sinners the papers painted them as if they were receiving prestigious prizes at glamorous banquets?

Fresh from drafting the blueprints for Mayer's beach house, MGM art director Cedric Gibbons was charged with designing this 'award of merit'. Legend has it Gibbons was bored ›

during one of the Academy's many lengthy meetings throughout 1927, and began sketching ideas on the tablecloth. What he doodled would go on to become one of the most recognisable images in cinema history: a male figure, in the Art Deco style, plunging a broadsword into a reel of film. A few years later, the figure would acquire a nickname. Its exact origins are still debated, but the most entertaining explanation comes from the actress Bette Davis, who, on receiving her Academy Award in 1935, remarked that the little statue's backside resembled that of her husband, Harmon O. Nelson.

The 'O' stood for 'Oscar'.

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WITH THE AWARD DESIGNED — AND sketches sent off to the California Bronze Foundry for manufacture — voting got underway for the first ceremony.

In the summer of 1928, ballot slips were mailed out to Academy members, with a reminder that only movies released between 1 August 1927 and 31 July 1928 were eligible for selection. Unfortunately, many chose to ignore this, casting votes for the likes of Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* and Buster Keaton's *The General*, released in 1925 and 1926 respectively. The shortlisting process was subsequently delayed as ballots had to be returned and members urged to read the rules properly.

There were 12 categories for voters to choose from, and for the only time in Academy Awards history, they included two separate prizes for Best Director: one for Comedy Picture and one for Dramatic. Another one-off was the Best Picture award, which was split into 'Outstanding Picture' and 'Unique And Artistic Picture.' This effectively translated as 'Best Blockbuster' and 'Best Arthouse Film': a distinction the Academy would briefly consider reinstating in 2018, with the (unsuccessful) proposal of an Oscar for 'Best Popular Film'.

A third first-and-only category — 'Best Title Writing' — hinted at a radical upheaval that had coincided with the Awards' birth. October 1927 had seen the release of Warner Bros.' *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson. The first feature-length film with synchronised sound (both music and speech), the movie had provoked screams of delight in cinemas when Jolson delivered his catchphrase, "You ain't heard nothin' yet!" Moviegoers really *hadn't*: they were used to silent cinema — actors mouthing in-between the insertion of text-filled 'title cards' — and suddenly they were hearing Jolson's *true* voice, synched to his lip movements, speaking directly to them. The movie was an overnight sensation: 'talkies' had arrived, and cinema was changed forever.

Unsure quite what to do with this oddity, the Academy deemed *The Jazz Singer* unfit for competition against its silent counterparts, palming Warner Bros. off with an 'Honorary Award' for "revolutionising the industry". But Hollywood's title-card scribes, presumably









Top to bottom: Year-one winners gather, including Best Actress Janet Gaynor (centre); Charlie Chaplin in The Circus (1928). He was given a special award but didn't show up; Douglas Fairbanks Sr, the Academy's first president, presents Al Jolson and producer Darryl F. Zanuck with Honorary Oscars for 1927's industry-changing The Jazz Singer; Best Director Frank Borzage, for 7th Heaven, and his star, Gaynor.

aware that their goose was cooked, lobbied for a 'Best Title Writing' gong to be featured on the docket. "Include them by all means," shrugged one board member. "This may be their last chance." It was indeed: by the second Academy Awards in 1930, the category was gone, and practically every nominated picture was a 'talkie'. The silent era was over.

As the votes for the first ceremony were tallied in early 1929, some parties expressed concern that studio heads might simply have plumped for their own movies. They needn't have worried about Louis B. Mayer, who did the exact opposite. MGM's big hitter in 1928 was a film called *The Crowd*, directed by King Vidor. Originally titled *One Of The Mob*, the movie was an experimental attempt — in the mould of James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses* — to create an epic work of art about an ordinary, workaday man. Just as Joyce had shocked the literary world by describing his protagonist moving his bowels, Vidor became the first filmmaker in history to show a toilet on screen.

Mayer despised the picture, condemning it as "unglamorous" and "against [MGM's] image". He thought movies should be thrilling and exotic,



Alamy, Getty, Photofest

not full of regular schmoes and lavatories. The Academy's Central Board of Judges felt otherwise, though, and at their final deliberations on 15 February 1929, they selected *The Crowd* as the winning entry for 'Unique And Artistic Picture'. A furious Mayer argued against his own movie all night, until finally, at 5am, the Board conceded and gave it to a Fox Studios film instead.

With voting now finalised, the invites could be sent out and a reservation made for a private gathering at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel's Blossom Room on 16 May. The Academy Awards were ready for launch.

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"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN... WELCOME to *suspense*!"

This was how Bob Hope opened the 25th Oscars (the first to be televised) back in 1953. There was significantly *less* suspense in the air at 1929's inaugural ceremony — the winners had been printed in the trade papers three months earlier. Indeed, according to Best Actress recipient Janet Gaynor, the event was "more like a private party than a big public occasion". Five actors were nominated; two of them attended. The entire event counted just 270 attendees, there was no broadcast coverage, and the prizegiving element lasted less than 15 minutes. That was still long enough to give birth to a perennial Oscars tradition, though: namely, complaints about the duration of speeches. "Long-winded," reported one attendee. "The audience sank back, exhausted."

Guests were treated to half-broiled chicken on toast, followed by chocolate ice cream, before Al Jolson stepped up to conclude proceedings with a song (presumably greeted by glares from all the title-writers he'd forced into early retirement). "They didn't give me one," Jolson remarked of the golden statuette the winners were clutching. "I could use one; they look heavy and I need another paperweight."

The wisecrack was delivered with tongue firmly in cheek, but there was truth at the heart of it. At this stage, the Academy Award was nowhere near the life-changing, career-enhancing status symbol it is today. Charlie Chaplin didn't even bother showing up to collect his, for 1928 comedy *The Circus*. Janet Gaynor was present to receive hers, but years later she would recall, "My agent didn't call me up the next day with an offer to double my salary. I didn't find a pile of scripts at my door. Photographers weren't camped on my front lawn. I just got up at 5am and drove off to the studio — as always." *The New York Times* covered the event — over two whole paragraphs.

But it wouldn't take long for that little golden figure to start gaining clout. In the wake of the first ceremony, media tycoon William Randolph Hearst ordered his newspaper columnists to start talking up the Academy Award as cinema's most prestigious prize (largely in the hope that he might wangle one for his mistress, the actor Marion Davies). The second ceremony, held in April 1930, was broadcast on the radio, vastly widening its reach. And as the popularity of American movies exploded over the coming years, so did the notoriety of the event that honoured them. By the '40s, the Awards were being aired internationally on shortwave radio, and 'Oscar' — as the figure was now officially known — had become a Hollywood icon, recognised throughout the western world.

This fact was abundantly clear to the first-ever Best Actor winner, Emil Jannings. A Swiss-born German silent-film star, Jannings left Los Angeles to return to his homeland in 1929. During the Second World War, he worked for Nazi minister Joseph Goebbels, producing anti-British propaganda. When victorious Allied troops arrived in Berlin in 1945, legend has it Jannings ran through the streets brandishing his statuette, shouting, "Don't shoot, I have won an Oscar!" (The troops didn't shoot — though Jannings never worked again.)

Such was the power of this 13-and-a-half-inch trophy, initially conceived as just a shiny distraction from bad press and better pay. And today, nearly a century after its birth, its power is even greater. What began as, in Janet Gaynor's words, "a small group getting together for a pat on the back" has become a global phenomenon — the most famous party on Earth. Each year, the Oscars attracts tens of millions of viewers, generates enough headlines and memes to buckle the internet, and supercharges careers in an instant.

Not a bad legacy for one hastily built beach house.

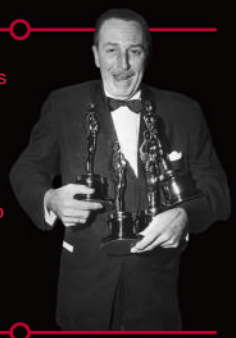
GO FIGURE

THE OSCARS' VITAL STATS



5 YEARS THAT OSCARS WERE AWARDED FOR BEST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, FROM 1933 TO 1937.

59 Nominations for Walt Disney, the most on record for anyone. Out of those, he also has the most wins: 26 (including four honorary awards).



3 Years that, because of a metal shortage during World War II, the Oscars were made of painted plaster.



12 Length in minutes of standing ovation for Charlie Chaplin after he won a lifetime achievement award in 1972.

$60,500 Paid in 1992 by a private collector for the 1946 Oscar that Harold Russell won for Best Supporting Actor. Russell auctioned the award to pay for his wife's medical expenses.

10 Years of exile for Will Smith after he slapped presenter Chris Rock in the face on stage in 2022.

20 Minutes the 1959 show was short by. Emcee Jerry Lewis ad-libbed, leading the orchestra with a baton and inviting all the winners on stage. They danced together until they got bored, and exited stage left.



SPOILER WARNING

INDISPENSABLE HOME ENTERTAINMENT

[EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT]



RAINE ALLEN-MILLER'S *Rye Lane*, which tells the story of how two lost and lonely souls (David Jonsson's Dom and Vivian Oparah's Yas) connect over the course of one chaotic night in South London, is one of the finest and funniest romcoms in many a year. It's a film so tied to its setting — shot entirely on location in areas like Peckham and Brixton — that it's wild to think that writers Tom Melia and Nathan Bryon originally set it in North London and had a completely different title. "It was called 'Vibes And Stuff'!" laughs Allen-Miller. "But I always really believed in the idea of setting this film in South London."

Now that the film is on Disney+, we decided to bridge the North/South (London) divide and bring together Allen-Miller, writers Melia and Bryon, and stars Jonsson and Oparah for a walk through the film's key moments, filled with vibes and stuff.

THE TOILET

The film begins with Dom having something of an emotional breakdown on a toilet in the Coal Rooms in Peckham, when into the cubicle next door — and his life — walks Yas. The opening shot sees the camera track along various cubicles in which all manner of stuff is happening, before alighting on Dom.

Nathan Bryon: It's such a dynamic start to the movie. You definitely never expect to start a romcom flashing over all the different toilets in London. Who is in these different toilets? That was a nice brainstorming session.

Tom Melia: We used to have a scene where



Memory Lane

Empire reminisces with the cast and creators of the ace new Brit romcom

Dom's phone dies in the gallery. Then he goes to the toilet and cries. Somewhere along the process that became our first scene.

Bryon: One of the first things we saw was the movement of the camera above all the toilets, and it was better than we could have imagined.

Raine Allen-Miller: That top shot was actually shot in the art gallery toilets. Their toilets are next to each other perfectly. We designed the toilets, and I feel bad because the gallery asked if they could keep the toilets like that. I said no, because I wanted the film to be the film. But now I think it would be quite cool to go and visit those loos.

David Jonsson: I'm a bit funny about toilets. You know when you go into a toilet and you instantly feel like it's a bit scummy? But the wonderful set designer told me straight off the bat, "It's been cleaned thoroughly. Cry your heart out."

Vivian Oparah: I remember that it was a really nice toilet. There were people on deck making sure it was ten out of ten. Raine wanted it to be a really intense, silly cry and David was trying to find the truth of it. I kept popping my head round the cubicle and going, "You okay?" It was hilarious and crazy.

WALK AND TALK

Much of the movie tracks Dom and Yas as they walk through Peckham, including — yes! — Rye Lane Market, with its wonderful cast of eccentric characters, including a cameo from Levi Roots, the creator of Reggae Reggae sauce.

Oparah: My friends found that so funny because I'm obsessed with Reggae Reggae sauce. He has the best collection of rings I've ever seen in my life.

Allen-Miller: I wanted to create the magic of all these wonderful things that are happening at once. Yas and Dom are walking through a quite standard market but it just so happens that all the shutters are down and they're multi-coloured and there's a cowboy walking by. It's all those little moments that feel magical but also real and believable. It happens at the right time. Their relationship happens at the right time.

Jonsson: You know, this is my first film. In a way you can't ask for a better thing to do first. It really involves community and there's no sense of us pushing anything away. We did have people stand on the sides and watch a scene play out. That happens in Rye Lane Market. There's probably more film footage on people's phones than we got. It's that kind of a place.

Allen-Miller: The cowboy came from the fact that when you walk around Brixton, Peckham or anywhere in London, there's always an odd, interesting character. I remember saying, "I want a cowboy. Can you please write in, 'He's got a glittery hat and he moonwalks and he says "boring" to Dom?'" The reason I wanted it is because it's true, it's silly, it's a bit bonkers.

Oparah: I loved it. Having a place which felt so alive was endless fodder to play off and react to. I honestly didn't know what was engineered, where the film stopped and reality started. ›



Above: Ah, the ups and downs of love. Yas (Vivian Oparah) and Dom (David Jonsson). **Right:** Writers Tom Melia and Nathan Bryon stand either side of stars Jonsson and Oparah, on location in South London.











Right, top to bottom: Dom has a phone/toilet meltdown; Men talking music; Rye Lane Market, centre of the community; Director Raine Allen-Miller at the monitors; Brixton's opulent Ritzy cinema.

Everything started to blur. If someone wanted to walk into the shoot and have a conversation with you, that could happen. For me as Yas, it was fantastic. She's always trying to run to the next moment.

Jonsson: I remember Raine really embracing the community. For me it felt like we were doing something bigger than just entertainment.

CINEMA PARADISO (SOUTH LONDON EDITION)

Cinema, and cinemas, play a huge part in *Rye Lane*, with Brixton's iconic Ritzy and Peckham's very cool Peckhamplex both playing themselves.

Allen-Miller: That was a big thing for me. I wanted to shoot local and put energy and money into those businesses. I wanted businesses like Persepolis and Peckhamplex to get money and exposure.

Melia: The Ritzy was our suggestion. That's a really special cinema to me. That was my local cinema for three years. Our executive producer was once really kind to me when I did work experience at Clerkenwell Films. Afterwards, I forced her into meeting me to read one of my terrible scripts, and we met in the top floor of the Ritzy. Fast forward a decade later, and Nathan and I went there to watch them filming. It felt very surreal.

Bryon: And we watched it there opening night as well. It felt like a real full-circle moment.

Allen-Miller: We added in Peckhamplex. That was an additional photography thing. I love the Ritzy, but Peckhamplex isn't as shiny. And it's £4.99 to go to the cinema and that's really important for young people.

Jonsson: Peckhamplex has five-pound tickets. I've been there on a few dates myself. The Ritzy and Peckhamplex are really great cinemas. Shooting there was one of the few times we felt a sense of responsibility.

Allen-Miller: Peckhamplex wasn't available during Covid. I was so upset I honestly cried. But when we got to additional photography, I added in a scene where Yas thinks she sees Dom and they were available because Covid restrictions had changed. But we were told, "No, you can't shoot inside." And then when we turned up on the day, the crew had put all their shit inside Peckhamplex. So I said, "We can use it as a unit base? I'm sorry, I'm gonna have to stamp my foot now. Can we shoot in here?" And we did. And I got both my dream cinemas in the film.

Oparah: That scene got a big cheer when I was watching it in Peckhamplex.



COLIN ACTUALLY

At one point, Dom and Yas go to Brixton Market and rock up at a burrito stall called Love Guac'tually. But the nod to Richard Curtis' seminal 2003 romcom *Love Actually* doesn't end there. The proprietor of said stall is played by none other than Colin Firth.

Bryon: We wrote the burrito scene really early doors and as we started talking about casting suggestions, we were talking about putting a big name in that role.

Allen-Miller: For me, I wanted to do a friendly middle finger to Richard Curtis films, and Colin Firth was perfect for it.

Melia: We all talked about how it would be amazing if it was a romcom star. Then our executive producer, Sophie Meyer, said she had worked with Colin Firth on *St. Trinian's*. We were thinking, "Good luck getting Colin Firth." And then Raine said she would write him a letter.

Allen-Miller: I wrote him a letter, and he turned up and he was so lovely with Viv and David. Those three actually went off and had lunch together.



Left: Meeting cute in the heart of Peckham. **Below:** Romcom veteran Colin Firth makes a playful cameo appearance as Love Guac'tually's hair-netted cook; The moment we've all been waiting for!





Oparah: He gave us many gems which I will cherish forever. He's a lovely human being and so wise. From the moment he stepped out of his car and was in Brixton Market, I was like, "What is happening?" It was an insane experience.

Jonsson: This scene came up in the middle of the shoot. We got told before that it was going to be Colin Firth. But it's another thing when you turn up to Brixton Market and then a Mercedes turns up and Colin Firth gets out with a facemask on and the hairnet that he wears in the scene.

Melia: And he did it with the proviso that his fee went to charity, and that he wasn't mentioned in any of the press because he didn't want to take the shine away from the film.

Allen-Miller: I was talking to my boyfriend at the time and said, "I need to come up with a name for this restaurant that Colin Firth or someone like that works at." He just went, quick-fire, "Love Guac'tually." It was the coolest thing I've ever seen. And now we're engaged.

THE FINAL KISS

In a gloriously romantic finale, Dom and Yas — after going their separate ways, somewhat acrimoniously — reunite for a triumphant kiss (whirling camera, all the trimmings) involving a tourist boat and the Millennium Bridge.

Melia: We wrote a much more low-key, *Before Sunrise*-style ending which was bittersweet but you had to guess if they got together at the end. But we all got together and had a chat and said, "Look, either we're making a romcom or we're not making a romcom."

Bryon: We needed the big smooch.

Allen-Miller: I think it's important that you have that scale at the end and it feels epic and it feels London. Being near the Tate Modern felt like the right part [of town]. It's just so romantic. I went into this film saying it cannot be cringe at all. And because 80 per cent of it isn't cringe, I think we got away with the last bit being a little bit cheesy.

Oparah: The film subverts the romcom conventions. And then we were finally arriving at the big romcom moment and it felt grandiose in a way that we'd earned. On the day, I was watching David run laps across the bridge while I was going insane spinning around in circles on that boat.

Allen-Miller: For me, this still needed to be in South London. So the rule was that Dom never actually goes completely over the bridge. I did want to keep it south of the river.

Jonsson: This is an indie film and somehow we managed to film on a very popular bridge. It was brilliant. We had to hold traffic on each end and then go for this scene. In that moment, Dom is really pumped so I'd get ready for it and then they'd say, "Sorry, there's a loose one" — meaning someone is walking across the bridge. In one sense it was difficult, because we had to make sure it was clear so someone wouldn't be looking into the camera as I'm pouring out my heart.

Allen-Miller: We were allowed to close the bridge for seven minutes at a time. But the craziest thing was it snowed and the sun came out. It actually snowed. In some of those shots there's snow.

Jonsson: I've walked across that bridge so many times. I love London and that bridge is a bit emblematic for me. It's just right on the edge of South, isn't it? We pushed to the end of South London, moving into East London, my territory.

Bryon: I think the most important thing for me was that these young Black guys get their beautiful, grand happy ending like all those romcoms that have come before have had. You've got all those Hollywood moments, but it's in our London. That was really important for me. **CHRIS HEWITT**

RYE LANE IS OUT NOW ON DISNEY+

THE STORY OF THE SHOT

How iconic images came to life

Gladiator

FROM, "I WILL have my vengeance, in this life or the next," to, "What we do in life echoes in eternity," *Gladiator* is not a film that's wanting for memorable dialogue. But the line that's quoted more than any other — so much so that it was even famously sampled by rapper Jay-Z on *The Black Album* — comes 67 minutes into the Ridley Scott epic.

"Are you not entertained? Are you not entertained? Is this not why you are here?"

Delivered by Maximus — his arms held aloft to the stunned crowd — it's a defiant image that served as the basis for many *Gladiator* one-sheets. Interestingly, the line wasn't intended, initially at least, for Russell Crowe's reluctant hero.

"The whole, 'Are you not entertained?' comment was originally a line that I gave to Oliver Reed's Proximo," says David Franzoni, who wrote the initial script. It's well known that *Gladiator* had many rewrites during filming — Franzoni, John Logan and William Nicholson all have screenplay credits. And, says Franzoni, "This line got pushed around, so by the time the second official draft was done, it had moved over to Maximus."

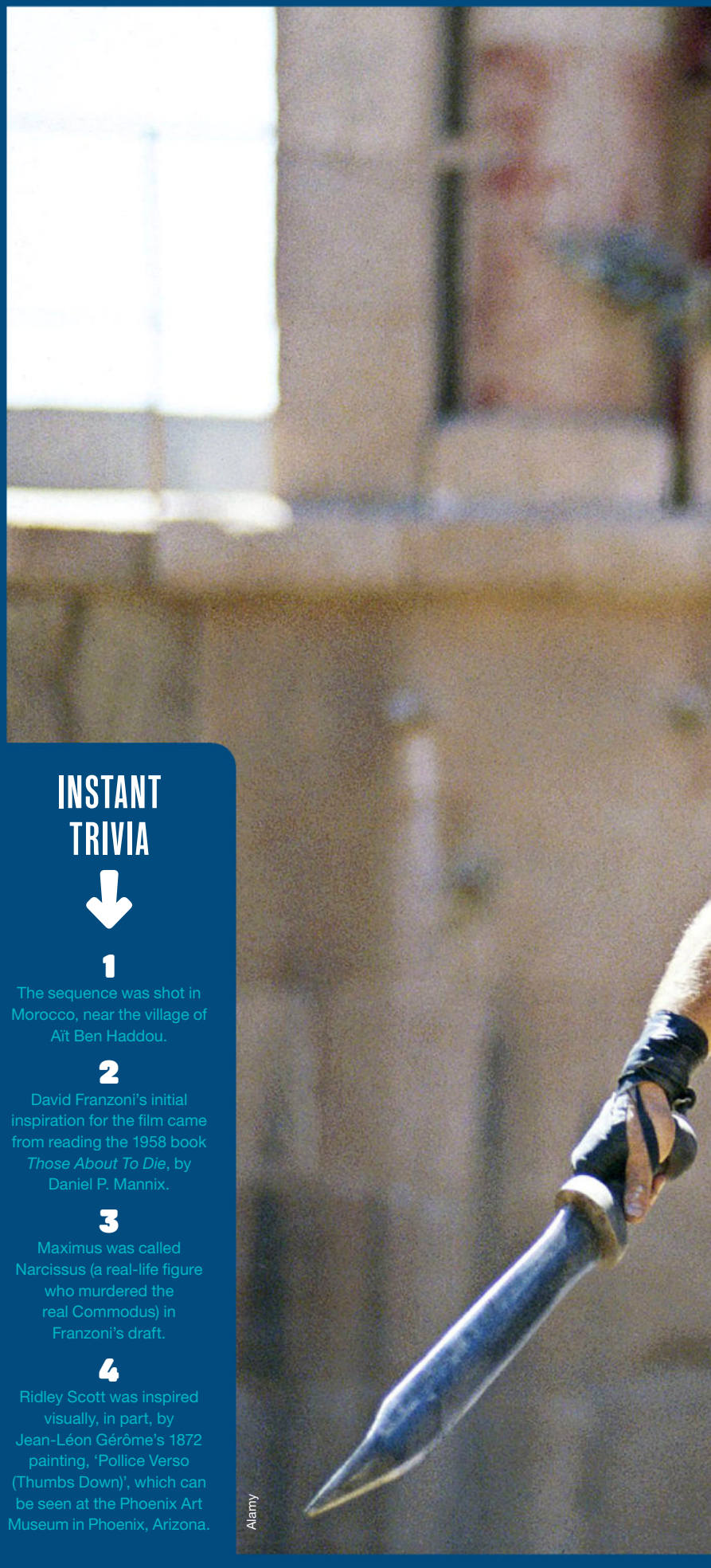
It's a moment that's all the more impactful because of what precedes it, a brutal and brief battle as Maximus — making his entrance into the larger world of gladiatorial combat, and still a few steps away from the Colosseum — stabs and slashes his way through six well-armed opponents in under a minute. The final kill — which sees Maximus finish off a beaten challenger by decapitating him — is especially brutal. Are we not entertained, indeed.

"That was actually Russell's idea," recalls fight master Nick Powell. "I had choreographed the whole sequence. And Russell had learned it. And Russ says, 'Why don't I just pull out both swords and use them like scissors and chop his head off?' It didn't feel right to me. But then he showed it to me, and it looked great."

The sequence also marks a key turning point in the movie for both Maximus — who begins to understand the power a gladiator can have over the mob — and the audience, whether they're at the arena or sitting in a cinema. "We wanted to remind ourselves and the audience that this show was about 'us', not a distant-in-the-past 'them'," says Franzoni. "The gladiators were entertainers. In the third official draft, I wrote the moment of Maximus throwing the sword at the audience and Russell saw that's where the line finally belonged, and he was right!"

So right, in fact, that it still resonates today. Or echoes in eternity, if you will. "I knew when we were filming that it was a great line," says Powell. "When you're filming it, you don't quite know what's going to be the thing that stands out in people's minds when the edit is complete. Even today, when that line comes up, everybody recognises it, everybody knows it." Twenty-plus years later, the answer to Maximus' question remains a resounding affirmative. **AMON WARMANN**

***GLADIATOR* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**



Alamy

INSTANT TRIVIA

1
The sequence was shot in Morocco, near the village of Aït Ben Haddou.

2
David Franzoni's initial inspiration for the film came from reading the 1958 book *Those About To Die*, by Daniel P. Mannix.

3
Maximus was called Narcissus (a real-life figure who murdered the real Commodus) in Franzoni's draft.

4
Ridley Scott was inspired visually, in part, by Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1872 painting, 'Pollice Verso (Thumbs Down)', which can be seen at the Phoenix Art Museum in Phoenix, Arizona.



Let him entertain you: Russell Crowe as Maximus.

How to become an overnight success (in just ten years)

65 writer/directors SCOTT BECK and BRYAN WOODS on their long creative journey

SCOTT BECK AND Bryan Woods are two of the hottest screenwriters in Hollywood, with their eye for a high concept begetting the likes of *A Quiet Place* and this month's Adam Driver-fights-dinosaurs epic, *65* (which they also directed). It seems like they came out of nowhere — an instant overnight success — but the opposite is true: they've been plugging away as a partnership for over 20 years. They tell *Empire* how they did it.

FIND A PARTNER

Beck and Woods both grew up in Bettendorf, a small town in Iowa. Both were movie-mad and ploughing their own furrow until their creative eyes met across a crowded room. "We would help out each other, I would produce Bryan's [short] films, or it could come down to holding the boom mic," says Beck. "Then we realised the type of movies we were making could be complementary. As soon as we wrote the first script together it was very seamless."

KEEP GOING

The pair had multiple false starts in their careers, and as recently as 2015 were working at the fabled Arclight cinema in LA. "You have dreams of making it at age 20," says Woods. "And we were certainly trying, but for us it felt like it wasn't ten years of breaking into the business — it was ten years of failure, of getting rejected from the Sundance Institute, from the Nicholl Fellowship screenwriting competition." But the duo were never deterred, even making a spreadsheet detailing when their favourite directors made a breakthrough. "Ridley Scott didn't make *The Duellists* until he was 40," laughs Beck. "It took that pressure off."

Eventually, they got a break with a spec script called *Nightlight*, on which they made their directorial debuts in 2015 (both aged 31) . "We were like, 'What if Stanley Kubrick did a found-footage movie?'" Says Woods. "We shot it in Utah and tried to do it all in oners, and it was nightmarish and difficult, but it was literally our dreams coming true."

FIND A NICHE

"If Stanley Kubrick did a found-footage movie", "A family fights off alien invaders who can hunt you if you make the slightest noise", "Adam Driver punches a T-rex" — the basic storylines of *Nightlight*, *A Quiet Place* and *65* — all suggest one thing: Beck and Woods are masters of the high concept. Something they deliberately zeroed in on. "Our passion led us into horror suspense thrillers just by virtue of what we wanted to do as filmmakers," says Beck, who's also a big arthouse guy, namechecking *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Gerry* as inspirations for *65*. "But there is an understanding of, 'The genre is the star'. You don't need big movie stars, or a big budget."

HONE THE HIGH CONCEPT

The high concepts are written down, piecemeal, in journals and diaries that they both keep.







Below, left to right: Dream team: Bryan Woods and Scott Beck; Things that go bump in the *Nightlight* — Chloe Bridges gets a shock in the duo's 2015 movie.



Alamy, Getty Images

"The good ideas stick around," says Woods. "*A Quiet Place* didn't even feel high-concept when we first wrote it down. It was simply Scott and I talking about trying to do a modern-day silent film." *65* started out from a deep desire to do a dinosaur movie, and somehow emerge from *Jurassic Park*'s shadow. "Then we thought of the *Star Wars* idea of a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. What if somebody travelling across the gulf of space found Earth, not Tatooine or Dagobah, and it was the time of dinosaurs?"" That'll do it.

LET GO OF EGO

The high concept of *A Quiet Place* intrigued John Krasinski so much that, when he was sent the script to read with a view to starring, he wanted to direct it, with his wife, Emily Blunt, also starring. There was just one problem: Beck and Woods already had a deal to direct, and had to weigh up the pros and cons of stepping aside to let Krasinski not only direct their script, but rewrite it too. "It was the script where we felt like it all clicked together," says Beck. "It was something really precious and special to us." They took a week off to think about it, canvassing counsel from all corners. "And we came out of that week and were like, 'We can't turn that down,'" adds Beck. "Our career has been littered with those moments, where it feels like there's a failure or a hiccup. But we had to remind ourselves, 'There's another opportunity provided we make it for ourselves.'"





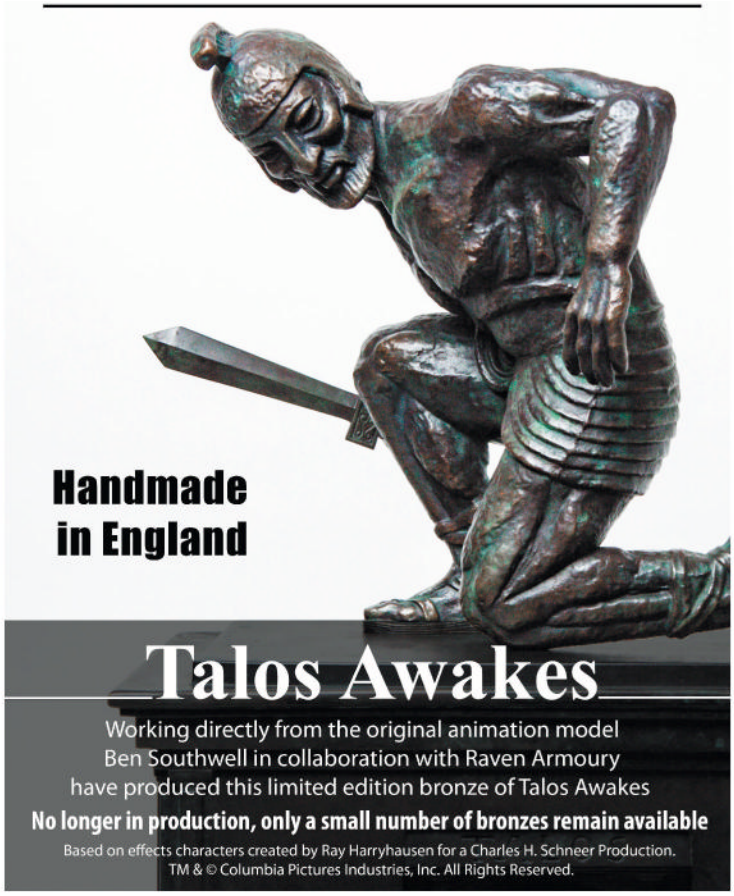
Top to bottom: Adam Driver goes hunting for dinosaurs in *65*; The stuff of nightmares — Chaney Morrow in *Haunt* (2019); John Krasinski, Noah Jupe, Emily Blunt and Millicent Simmonds in *A Quiet Place* (2018).

USE MOMENTUM

Strike while the iron is hot. There's truth in that old cliché, and when *A Quiet Place* became a huge, franchise-spawning hit, Beck and Woods struck. "Usually where you end up is not where you intended," says Beck, "but it's exactly where you need to be." Their 2019 slasher movie, *Haunt*, had already been in development, but *A Quiet Place* pushed it towards the green light, *65* became a reality, and they bagged writing duties on Stephen King adaptation *The Boogeyman*, which has since become a Rob Savage movie, but which has retained many of their scare sequences. "With *65*, they'd never let us make a dinosaur movie except in the wake of *A Quiet Place*. We really did think, 'This is a window to try to get a bigger budget thing off the ground.'" As for their future, *Empire* spoke to them before the writers' strike hit (see page 10), but their next big project is building a movie theatre in their home town called The Last Picture House. "We're hoping to open that up this fall," says Beck. "And hopefully we'll create this weird cinematic oasis in the middle of Iowa." Now that's high concept. **CHRIS HEWITT**

***65* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

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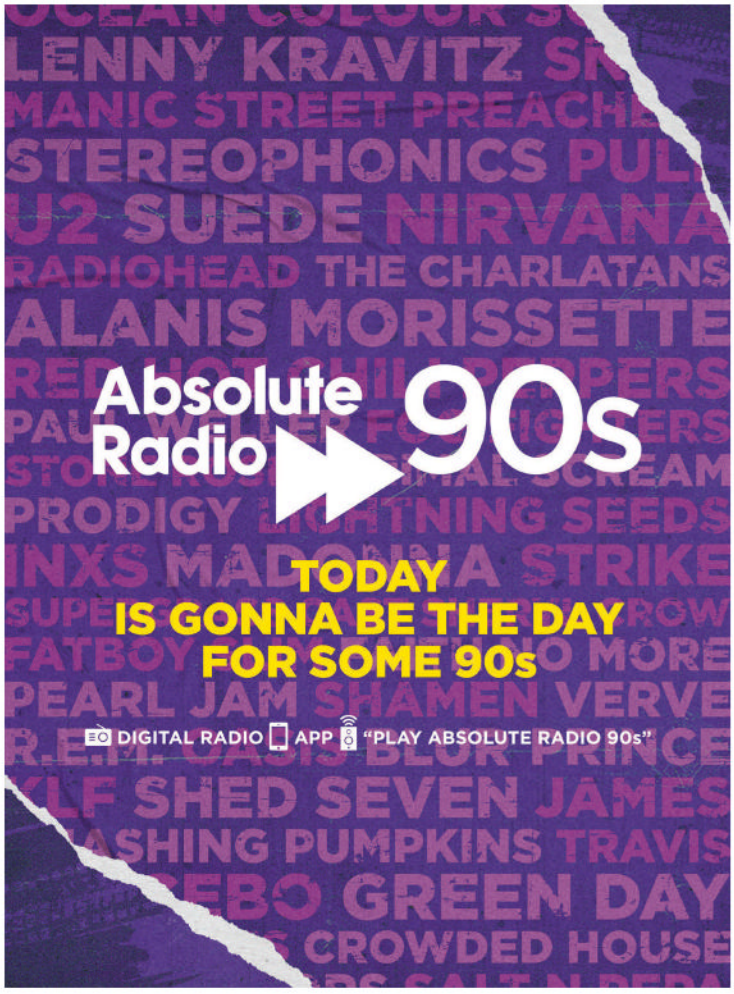


Talos Awakes

Working directly from the original animation model
Ben Southwell in collaboration with Raven Armoury
have produced this limited edition bronze of Talos Awakes

No longer in production, only a small number of bronzes remain available

Based on effects characters created by Ray Harryhausen for a Charles H. Schneer Production.
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THE CULT OF KIM NEWMAN

The critic and novelist selects the month's weirdest home-ent releases



NORWEGIAN TOMMY WIRKOLA, of the *Dead Snow* Nazi-zombie movies, delivers a farcical, gruesome, Scandi-noir shaggy-dog tale with a Coen brothers feel in *The Trip*. Bickering couple Lars (Aksel Hennie) and Lisa (Noomi Rapace) — Swedes who've relocated to Norway and faltered in showbiz careers — retreat to a remote cabin where each plans to murder the other... only to have their crime scene invaded by three escaped convicts (Atle Antonsen, Christian Rubeck, André Eriksen) who make their bad day worse, prompting more and more extreme behaviour. It begins with icy, witty marital discord — Hennie and Rapace are hilariously vicious over Scrabble — then gets into broad black comedy, with bloody, transgressive material (other bodily discharges also feature) and several hilarious reversals of fortune. Funniest line (in context): "Over to you, Queer Dave."

Super-efficient, stylishly dressed, one-man-genocide assassins who are secret softies have been a thing in Asian cinema for decades, so it's not really fair to tag Choi Jae-hoon's *The Killer* as a riff on the *John Wick* or *Taken* films. It even borrows its export title from John Woo's classic of the sub-genre. A seemingly dull businessman (Jang Hyuk) is stuck by his wife with the unwanted gig of looking after the teenage daughter (K-pop star Anne) of a friend she's off on a girls-away trip with. The girl turns out to be a trouble magnet targeted by street punks, sex-traffickers, Russian Mafia, corrupt police and judiciary, and hordes of well-armed goons. And the businessman is a mercenary who now feels obligated to murder half of Seoul to prevent harm coming to a girl who is a) not grateful and b) astonishingly luckless. It's thin drama, though Hyuk gets wry laughs as the hitman who wipes out whole gangs with the dour look of a sitcom husband dragooned into a thankless chore. Choi plus an army of stuntmen and choreographers stage a non-stop series of high-excitement fights.

Kensuke Sonomura's *Bad City* offers retro gangster action, favouring fists and knives over guns in impressive skirmishes, brawls and all-out battles. It has a simple sense of morality but a complicated plot — an evil corporation with political connections exerts a stranglehold over Kaiko City and a long-haired, knife-fighting hitman causes trouble between Japanese *yakuza* and Korean Mafia clans. Tough cop Torada (Hitoshi Ozawa), framed for murder, is sprung from jail and put in charge of a task-force to clean up the city and bring down the corporate big bads ... which he does basically by fighting with everyone. As expected, one of the heroes dies to further motivate the others, an apparent ally is really in with the villains, and a gangster or two come over to the good guys' side — but the plotting is strictly subsidiary to impressive, unending punch-ups and beat-downs.

Nightmare Radio: The Night Stalker is a reasonably successful exercise in repackaging — a clutch of short horror films glued together by a wraparound with a late-night DJ (Paula Brasca) stalked by a grudge-holding persistent caller (Augustin Olcese). As time-outs from this suspense scenario, we get a diverse programme of downbeat horror tales about menacing spectres, haunted asylums, encounters on lonely roads, vampire wineries and the like. A particular highlight is 'Foxes', a 2011 Irish short from Lorcan Finnegan (*Vivarium*, *Nocebo*) set in an eerily abandoned post-economic-downturn housing development.

CULT HERO OF THE MONTH

ANDY MITTON

Last issue I looked at writer-director Andy Mitton's *The Harbinger* — one of the best horrors of the pandemic/lockdown era. Mitton is a major creative in a grey area between horror, philosophy and indie character drama. *YellowBrickRoad* (2010) and *We Go On* (2016), co-directed with editor-writer Jesse Holland, set out on paths that Mitton's solo features, *The Witch In The Window* (2018) and *The Harbinger* (2022), venture further along. *YellowBrickRoad* is a found-footage piece investigating the disappearance of the population of a small town. *We Go On* and *The Witch In The Window* are ghost stories which delve into what spirits might be and how they interact with the living — following a paranoid who offers $30,000 for proof of the afterlife but doesn't like the answers he gets, and a father and son restoring a remote farmhouse with a resident woman-in-black spectre.

Illustration: Neil Edwards. Alamy

Gutter credit







SPOILER WARNING

THE VIEWING GUIDE

A deep dive into the must-see moments from the month's big release



Scream VI

"NEW YORK. NEW Rules" declared the tagline for *Scream VI*, and for writers James Vanderbilt and Guy Busick, that was a motto that served them well as they crafted the latest chapter of The Continuing Adventures Of Ghostface.

BLOODY OPENING

Every *Scream* movie opens with a special guest star getting eviscerated by that film's masked killer. Here, Samara Weaving (who starred in *Ready Or Not*, the film that got directors Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett their shot at *Scream*) obliges, but the big twist comes when the camera lingers on this new Ghostface, who then pulls off his mask to reveal his face (hello, Tony Revolori). Strangely, both Busick and Vanderbilt came up with the idea independently of each other. "We sort of share a *Scream* brain, it's very odd," laughs Vanderbilt. "We sat down to talk and Guy started to pitch this idea, and then I showed him my pad which said, 'Ghostface takes off his mask, and we follow.'"

GHOSTED

Of course, there's another twist. Instead of a *Scream* film where we, but crucially not the potential victims, know the identity of the killers, this Ghostface (otherwise known as Jason) then receives his own phone call. It's *another* Ghostface, who then immediately asserts his dominance by butchering Jason. "We were planting a flag saying, 'This is not something that you expect,'" says Busick. "And also setting up that it's not about movies with the line, 'Who gives a fuck about movies?' as he stabs down and we go to the title card." One particularly neat touch: the voice of Roger L. Jackson, who's been playing Ghostface since the original movie, isn't actually heard until this scene. The Ghostface voice in the opening murder is actually Tony Revolori.

RULES RULE OKAY

In what is a series staple, the rules of this instalment are laid out to the assembled characters. "It felt very 2023 to have the conversation about how you have to continually refresh a franchise," says Vanderbilt. As with the previous entry, the film-savvy Mindy (Jasmin Savoy Brown) gets to rip into a fun speech involving legacy characters and the rampant spoiling of the fates of Tony Stark, Luke Skywalker and even James Bond. "I felt those weren't spoilers; enough years had passed from them," adds Vanderbilt. "But if you're seeing *Scream VI* before *The Last Jedi* or *Avengers: Endgame*, I'm thrilled."

INSIDE THE HOUSE

The film's biggest, and most bravura, set-piece comes when, having holed up in protagonist Sam Carpenter's (Melissa Barrera) apartment to avoid being Ghostfaced, our heroes find that the masked maniac is, somehow, already inside the apartment. In a sustained sequence, he murders Sam's roommate Quinn (Liana Liberato), while a desperate attempt at escape by clambering across a ladder placed between two apartments ends in tragedy as Mindy's (Jasmin Savoy Brown) girlfriend Anika (Devyn Nekoda), already nursing












a nasty stab-wound, plummets to her death. "We zeroed in pretty quickly on, 'We want someone to fall from a great height,'" says Busick. "We had the verticality of the city, these tall buildings. Then it was reverse engineering. 'Let's back it up and create the bloodiest set-piece we can.'"

WEATHERS THE STORM

After having finally offed the loveable but luckless knife-magnet Dewey (David Arquette) in the fifth instalment, it seems for a while that Busick and Vanderbilt are about to do the same with his ex-wife, Gale Weathers (Courteney Cox), as she faces off against Ghostface in her swish New York apartment. But, despite a sucking chest wound, Gale lives to fight another day. Just. "Gale had never had a phone call [from Ghostface]," says Vanderbilt. "It was such an amazing opportunity to give her a full meal on the phone with Ghostface, and a giant chase scene. It was an incredibly physical scene. That was a real location and those are concrete girders in the centre of that apartment, so if someone runs into it, it's not moving."

STABWAY

"As soon as we decided it was New York, we both looked at each other and went 'subway'," says Vanderbilt. But they had more than a foot-long Meatball Marinara on their mind. Instead, they wrote a sequence where Mindy gets menaced (and stabbed, not fatally) by Ghostface on a crowded New York subway train on Halloween night. "When we were developing this, we were talking to Kevin Williamson [who wrote the first two *Scream* movies] and he said, 'Be careful, because horror movies in New York, the reason they usually don't work is because you're safe, you're surrounded by people.' That was really exciting to us. We wanted to subvert that."

THREE AMIGOS

Most Ghostfaces come in pairs (only *Scream 3*'s Roman Bridger has gone it alone), but in a franchise first, it's revealed at the end that there are three Ghostfaces on Samantha's trail — the father, brother and sister of Richie Kirsch, the main killer of the fifth film. "We're huge fans of these movies, and when you're the sixth in a series, weaponising that knowledge against the audience, in a good way, can still surprise them," says Vanderbilt. "The fact that there have never been three Ghostfaces was something we were really excited about."

SISTERS OF SLAUGHTER

Given that she's the daughter of the original *Scream* psycho, Billy Loomis (with Skeet Ulrich popping up every now and again in spectral form to dispense awful parental advice), Sam Carpenter is an unusual detour from the more strait-laced Sidney Prescott. Nowhere is that more apparent than the end, when Sam (in Ghostface garb) overkills Dermot Mulroney's deranged head Ghostface, Detective Bailey, and bonds with her sister by giving her consent to unleash her inner slasher too. "*Scream* 5 was very much about the sisters coming together, but they actually don't have a lot of screentime together," admits Vanderbilt. "This is more about that sisterhood." The next batch of Ghostfaces had best tread carefully. **CHRIS HEWITT**

***SCREAM VI* IS OUT NOW ON DIGITAL, AND ON 10 JULY ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND 4K**



The Fabelmans speak

Michelle Williams, Paul Dano and Gabriel LaBelle on playing (well, almost) Steven Spielberg and his parents

THE FABELMANS, STEVEN SPIELBERG'S most intensely personal film to date, isn't called 'The Spielbergs' for a reason. But there's little question who the role models for the film's central trio — Michelle Williams' Mitzi, Paul Dano's Burt, and Gabriel LaBelle's Sammy Fabelman — were. Namely Spielberg's mother and father, Leah and Arnold (inspiration for much parental discord in his movies), and the director himself as a young bairn just discovering the joys, and welcome distractions, of cinema.

THE FATHER

As the put-upon Burt, receding into the shadows of a marriage on the wane and not quite able to comprehend his son's newfound love for filmmaking, Paul Dano provides everything you could want from a Dano performance, without the yelling: delicate, compassionate, wistful, pained. But when Dano first met Spielberg, he had no idea what the movie was, or which role he was up for...

"I hadn't been that nervous for a meeting in a long time, out of respect and admiration for Steven. On our last night of filming I told him that it would still take me a few years to process because it's quite something. It was nerve-racking to shoot because you don't want to disappoint that person, not just because he's Steven, but because it is so personal.

"The first time Steven and I spoke, his father had only passed about eight months before. So at times I felt like it was a heavy cloak to bear, because their relationship was more up and down than his relationship with his mom. And because the passing of his father was so recent, I could just feel it. But once you get through that first or



Clockwise from here: Family ties; Director Steven Spielberg sharing the tricks of the trade with Gabriel LaBelle — as his alter ego Sammy; Michelle Williams as the vivacious Mitzi; Paul Dano as dad Burt.





second day, then Steven really just becomes your collaborator and partner. And I think having him be that vulnerable about what he was making was really a gift to everybody on the set.

"I feel sometimes that a character meets you where you are in your life. When that happens, it's a really good feeling. I was really moved by how contained this man was. I always saw Sammy and Mitzi as the storm, and Burt as the grounding, and he had to have kept a lot of things inside so that others could let go. I just thought there was some beautiful American man there, somebody who was decent and had integrity but was flawed at the same time."

THE SON

Sammy Fabelman is not Steven Spielberg. But he's not a million miles away either from the film-fanatic teenager who threw himself into creative pursuits to dull the pain of watching his parents' marriage disintegrate. With all due respect to his role as Alfred in *Max 2: White House Hero*, it's Gabriel LaBelle's breakthrough performance, capturing the sensitivity and stubbornness of the young maestro...

"The first time I auditioned, I did not know what it was. It was an untitled Amblin film. I found out later that it might be a Steven Spielberg movie, about his life, where that character I auditioned for was a young him. I was like, 'Why didn't anybody tell me this?' I think it added to the pressure — oh, every filmmaker imaginable is probably going to see this. In a way, it also felt like an audition to the world. But it's definitely better that I didn't know. Why gamble with those odds?

"I forget about it and don't hear anything for months. Then three months later they want to call back and by then I know what it is. I'm researching about his life and I watch the Spielberg documentary so I can understand what's going on in his life. That goes well and the next day I meet with Spielberg. We have this hour-long meeting and I'm acting for half of it, I'm talking for half of it.

"After I was cast, I could talk to him about his life and as I got to know him and learn about his family and his story, it was more about making sure my friend Steven could get the story he deserves. That's where the pressure shifted. I know Steven belongs to the public, and I know Steven is an incredible filmmaker, and you don't want to be that guy who ruined Steven Spielberg's life."

THE MOTHER

Michelle Williams was Oscar-nominated, and rightly so, for her radiant and often dazzling turn as the extremely complex and free-spirited Mitzi, a woman constrained by marriage and the strictures of 1950s society, who recognised the artistic spirit blossoming in her son...

"It felt like a spell was cast over the room. You're recreating somebody's childhood, you're playing his parents, they've built sets that recreate his childhood homes. Which makes you feel like you are haunting this place. You're a friendly ghost, and you've been asked to appear, but it feels very eerie.

"We were trying to get as close as possible to these people who affected this man so much that he wanted to tell their story. I lost my mind the last day that we shot this film. I haven't cried that hard since I was a kid. This one messed me up, and it was over and I didn't want to let anybody go. I didn't want to say goodbye. I missed being her.

"I missed my relationships with people, both as Mitzi and Michelle. Steven's sisters were incredible, and they were full of their own recollections that were different from Steven's, and from a female perspective. You know, this is Steven's story about these two personalities that created this supernova, but Mitzi's three daughters are also fascinating, accomplished, developed and full-blooded in their own regards.

"[Mitzi] is so much more than I am. The vibrancy, the vitality, the passion, the creativity. She's inspired me, she's still rattling around inside of me. She lives much bigger, and brighter, than I do, but I want more of her. And when I miss it, I remember it. She still comes back to me when I'm with my children and I think, 'I should go dust the corners.' I think, 'What would Mitzi do?'" **ALEX GODFREY, HELEN O'HARA, CHRIS HEWITT**

THE FABELMANS **IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**



Robert Downey Jr and Jake Gyllenhaal as crime reporter Paul Avery and cartoonist Robert Graysmith.

THE MASTERPIECE

We reassess the greatest films of all time, one film at a time

Zodiac

WHEN IS A SERIAL-killer movie not a serial-killer movie? Perhaps when there's no arrest, no shoot-out, perhaps when his identity isn't what the filmmaker is most interested in at all. David Fincher had already made the best of the genre and this, no doubt, convinced Warner Bros. and Paramount to shell out for his sixth feature. But *Zodiac* is, as he told everyone at the time, a "newspaper movie". It has more in common with *All The President's Men* than it does with *Seven*. It's about information, mythology and the danger of being a passenger in your own life.

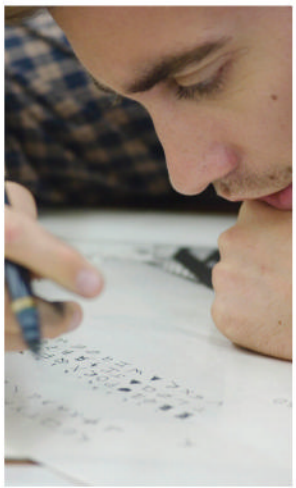
"More people die in the East Bay commute every three months than that idiot ever killed," says reporter Paul Avery (Robert Downey Jr), even if his dismissal of the outsized interest in the Zodiac Killer feels a little hollow given he's dying from a dissolute lifestyle, partly driven by trying to escape fear. He's talking to the political-cartoonist-turned-amateur-sleuth Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal), upon whose books, *Zodiac* and *Zodiac Unmasked*, James Vanderbilt's doorstop screenplay was based. But although the film is centred on Graysmith — in fact making his presence more explicitly felt than the books ever do — the filmmakers also conducted their own laborious research. Vanderbilt and producer Brad Fischer tracked down witnesses — using a private investigator for the particularly elusive Mike Mageau (played by Lee Norris and Jimmi Simpson at different ages), survivor of a Zodiac shooting — as well as key police figures, meeting with some alongside Fincher (as exhaustively detailed in Graysmith's book *Shooting Zodiac*). These included the film's third lead, Inspector Dave Toschi (Mark Ruffalo), a San Francisco detective who had provided inspiration for more fantastical Hollywood depictions of law enforcement: *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* (whose Scorpio Killer was shamelessly modelled after the real-life murderer still very much at large when it opened in 1971).

On *Zodiac*'s score release there's a snippet of Fincher in conversation with composer David Shire (who sound designer Ren Klyce suggested they employ to augment the impeccable needle-drop soundtrack, having created a temp track using his score of *All The President's Men* and *The Conversation*, another classic about all-consuming obsession). The director says, "I think the heart of the movie, unfortunately it turned out not to be Jake, but it's Ruffalo..." And that's true, for which there's one easy — perhaps cheap — explanation: Ruffalo's was the more nuanced work (while many people give their best-ever performances with Fincher, Gyllenhaal — who didn't enjoy the director's tendency for extensive takes — improved *after* working with him, rather than during). But Graysmith is a tricky part for anyone, because the character doesn't particularly affect anything, instead inserting himself into an investigation that didn't want — or arguably need — him. As Toschi says, "Zodiac was my job. It's not yours."

Fincher's films often feature obsessive protagonists, which isn't quite a smoking gun regarding his own personality or preoccupations,







Clockwise from top: Inspector William Armstrong (Anthony Edwards) on the case; Graysmith attempts to crack the killer's code; Mark Ruffalo as Inspector Dave Toschi, inspiration for more than one cinematic cop.

given most movie leads have to be extremely driven. But still, from *The Game* through *Zodiac*, *The Social Network*, *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* and *Mank*, there's an interest in men consumed by things that ultimately — they may fear or discover — might not actually matter. And *Zodiac*, *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* and *Mank* also have leads always slightly outside whatever situation they're in, living as a spectator.

Fincher's interest in the material was rooted in his childhood, growing up in northern California, where the Zodiac Killer petrified communities through the letters — including coded messages — he sent newspapers. He wasn't the first serial killer, but he was perhaps the first to use the press to psychically terrorise more people than he could ever physically hurt: a malignant shadow in the Golden State. Fincher remembers his father telling him police cars were tailing his school bus because the Zodiac had threatened to "shoot the kiddies as they came bouncing out". He was seven — you can see why that would stay with you.

The only (confirmed or purported) Zodiac attacks the film depicts are those with an eye witness, perhaps the most troubling being at Lake Berryessa: a mercilessly straight-forward, daylight knifing of Cecelia Ann Shepard (Pell James), who died of her wounds, and Bryan Hartnell (Patrick Scott Lewis), who survived and was consulted for the film. The matter-of-fact nature of the violence throughout *Zodiac* is terrifying. As is the fact there is not any significant closure. The killer is portrayed, in shadow or hoods, by different actors — in deference to differing witness descriptions — while the prime suspect, Arthur Leigh Allen, died without confession or conviction. Graysmith reports that Frank Black of the Pixies was considered for that part, before it went to John Carroll Lynch, who is utterly unnerving as a mundane face of everyday evil. The workplace interrogation scene with him is a masterpiece of staging and understatement. Not that there aren't flashes of flashiness throughout the movie: a montage of letters and headlines, with ciphers superimposed in the air, as Toschi and fellow detective Bill Armstrong (Anthony Edwards) repeatedly visit the *San Francisco Chronicle* (actually editor Angus Wall's idea rather than Fincher's). Or the time-lapse building of San Francisco's Transamerica Pyramid and an audio montage of music and newscast headlines, over black, to depict four years slipping by. These inventively portray the scale of the story, akin to the eternal top shot in *All The President's Men*, where the camera pulls up and up, leaving Woodward and Bernstein as dots in the Library Of Congress to show the size of the task facing those reporters.

When *Zodiac* didn't turn out to be *Seven 2* but was, instead, the movie Fincher promised from the script Vanderbilt wrote, the studios gave it a graveyard release in March 2007. No Oscars, modest business. But time has shown its true worth as an entirely satisfying film about dissatisfaction. As Fincher told *Empire* on set in January 2006: "The camera doesn't move. There is no bullshit. There is no safety net. The characters are the story. This movie is about being stuck." **NEV PIERCE**

***ZODIAC* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

Alamy, Getty Images, Shutterstock

FINCHER IN NUMBERS

THE STORY OF HIS CAREER IN STATS



28/8/1962
DAVID FINCHER IS BORN IN DENVER, COLORADO

2 NUMBER OF MTV VIDEO MUSIC AWARDS, FOR DIRECTION, HE HAS FOR MADONNA SONGS: 'EXPRESS YOURSELF' AND 'VOGUE'



1983
YEAR OF HIS FIRST CREDIT, AS ASSISTANT CAMERAMAN ON *RETURN OF THE JEDI*

3 NUMBER OF BEST DIRECTOR OSCAR NOMINATIONS (*THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON*, *THE SOCIAL NETWORK*, *MANK*)

3 NUMBER OF FILMS HE'S MADE WITH BRAD PITT



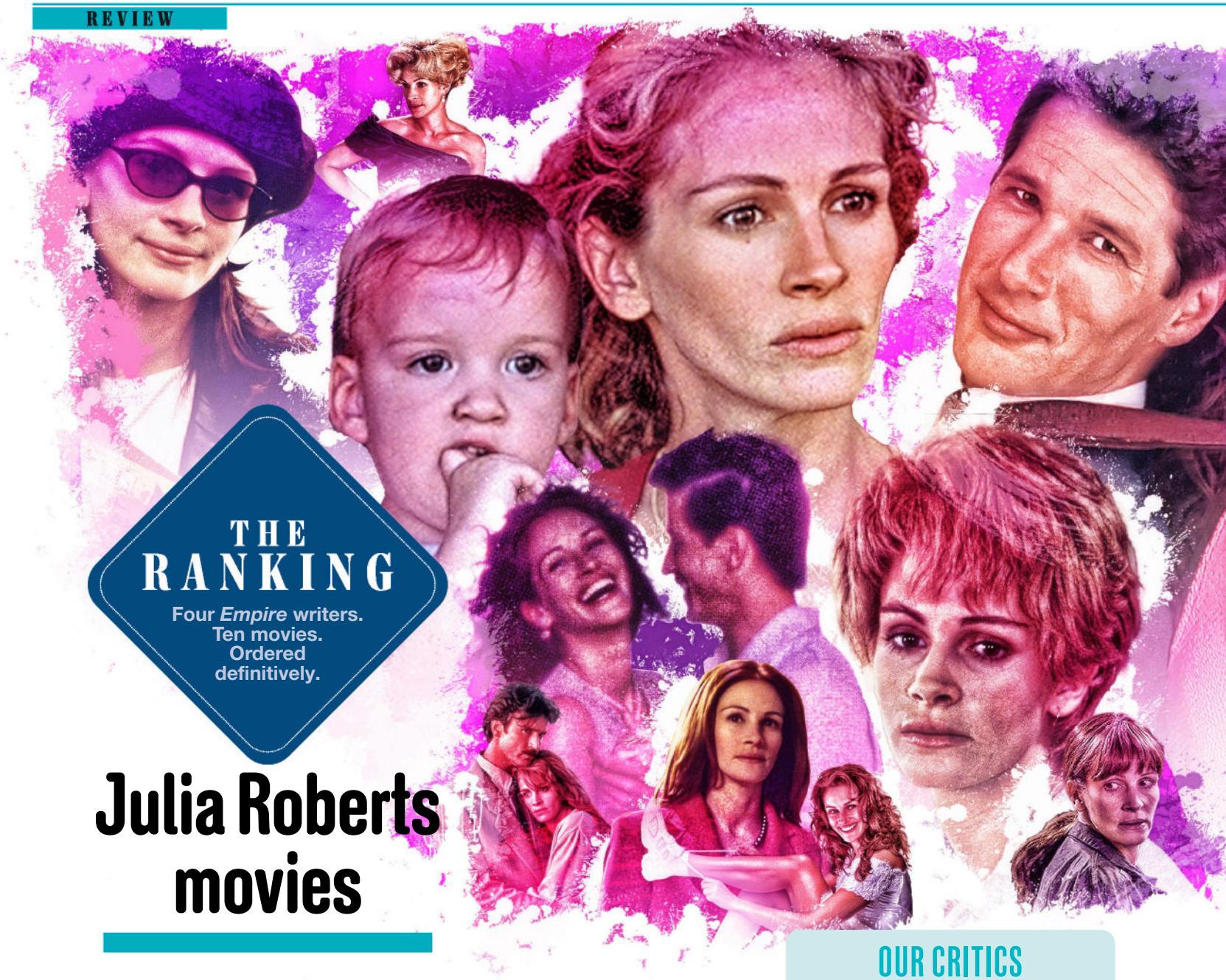
1992
YEAR OF HIS FIRST MOVIE, *ALIEN*[3]

12 NUMBER OF FILMS HE'S MADE AS DIRECTOR (INCLUDING *THE KILLER*, WHICH WILL BE RELEASED THIS YEAR)

57
TOTAL NUMBER OF MUSIC VIDEOS HE'S DIRECTED, INCLUDING AFTER *ALIEN*[3]



$369 million
AMOUNT GROSSED BY *GONE GIRL* AT THE WORLDWIDE BOX OFFICE, HIS BIGGEST HIT TO DATE



THE RANKING

Four *Empire* writers. Ten movies. Ordered definitively.

Julia Roberts movies

Helen: When did you first become aware of Julia Roberts?
Nick: Probably the poster for *Pretty Woman*, which I knew about before I saw the film. I was a bit young for such tales. But the poster was extremely striking.
Helen: I lived in a very small town and I still feel like it was on every street corner.
Nick: Famously, they're not actually her legs on it.
Becky: I remember that very clearly on my mum's shelf.
Helen: It was an iconic poster. It did launch a thousand imitations.
Nick: It has a lot to answer for. A lot of Matthew McConaughey leaning.
James: I first encountered Julia Roberts with the VHS cover of *Mystic Pizza*.
Nick: Was she leaning against a pizza?
James: She may or may not have had her own legs on the pizza. I wasn't entirely sure. But crucially, I never rented it. Up until recently, I thought it was about supernatural pizza.
Helen: It's one of her breakthrough roles.
James: It was very low-budget, but she has charisma and presence. She's incredibly charming and also really ballsy.
Becky: She's a bit of a manic pixie dream girl in this one.
Nick: Manic pizza dream girl.
Becky: She's got this little baby face — she hasn't quite grown into her cheekbones and her enormous grin.
Nick: She arrived almost fully formed, I think. It didn't take long. She didn't do ten years of small roles and then finally a break. She was fantastic and stood out straightaway.
James: But why do you think it is? It's partly that megawatt, dazzling smile. The laugh. She is like a real person with an inner life even in insubstantial roles.
Helen: I think she has that thing that a lot of female stars have had to have, certainly historically, where she's a man's girl but also a girl's girl. And that's particularly true of *Steel Magnolias*.
Becky: She absolutely holds her own against Sally Field, which is amazing considering it was such an early role in her career.
Nick: She's got amazing range and I'm not sure it's been fully used. I wish she'd been given more opportunities to be in great films. I think often she's better than the film she's in.
Helen: I think it shows the real paucity of roles if even Julia Roberts couldn't find great work. What were the chances for anybody else?

OUR CRITICS



BECKY DARKE
President of the Committee To Stop Julia Roberts From Wearing Terrible Wigs.



NICK DE SEMLYEN
Has a conspiracy theory to explain why *Conspiracy Theory* wasn't discussed.



JAMES DYER
He's just a guy, standing in front of Julia Roberts films, asking them to love him.



HELEN O'HARA
Loves Julia Roberts, is less fond of her Irish accents. So she isn't.



Illustration: Jacey

Nick: 1993 was a massive year for me. I got really excited about *Jurassic Park* and *The Fugitive*, but also *The Pelican Brief*. I think that's one of the better John Grishams, though it doesn't have enough pelicans in it.
James: The pelicans are in it but they're brief.
Helen: *Hook* is an interesting one because you have Julia Roberts working with Spielberg. But you have her cast as Tinkerbell.
James: That film is dreadful.
Helen: It's not dreadful.
Nick: I can confirm that it is dreadful, sorry.
Helen: We've skipped into the '90s past *Pretty Woman*, and that put her on the map in a huge way. It's an interesting film to talk about now, isn't it? The heartwarming romance between a sex worker and the man who hires her for a week.
Becky: There's something convincing at the heart of the relationship in this film. She and Gere have amazing chemistry.
Helen: It remains a slightly complicated film for me. But it's a great performance.
James: But they do have chemistry. They tried to recapture that in *Runaway Bride* and it didn't quite work.
Nick: You could say making it was a big mistake. Huge.
Becky: I hadn't seen that until I watched it for this. I've always been cautious because I love *Pretty Woman* so much. But I enjoyed it more than I was expecting to. It's very silly and strangely romantic for something that could have been a bit slut-shaming.
Helen: She had a couple of other enduring romcoms in the '90s. *My Best Friend's Wedding* in 1997 and *Notting Hill* in 1999.
James: *Notting Hill* being, of course, her greatest film.
Helen: Justify yourself, you ridiculous man.
James: It's glorious and I love it for all of its flaws. What she does in that, which is difficult to do, is she is both the girl-next-door and the triple-A megawatt superstar and she balances it perfectly.
Becky: Which is kind of a microcosm of her as an actress.
James: *Notting Hill* is much maligned for her 'standing in front of a guy asking him to love her' line, but it does get me every time. I'm sorry. No, I'm not sorry. I won't apologise for it.
Nick: *My Best Friend's Wedding*, I did not get on with. Her character in it is a sociopath.
Becky: But the film subverts it because it's very much on Cameron Diaz's side. You don't want her to get together with the best friend.
Helen: I certainly came into the film rooting for Julia Roberts. The grammar of a romcom tells us that she will end up with the guy. But by the end it convinced me that she's a howling monster.
Nick: I just found it a bit confused, like it didn't know exactly what it was trying to do.
Helen: Let's talk the 2000s, which got off to a really good start with her Oscar-winning performance in *Erin Brockovich*.
Nick: This is her at the peak of her powers. She gets her hands on some really strong material and gets to say the line, "Bite my ass, Krispy Kreme."
Helen: "That's all you got, lady. Two wrong feet in fucking ugly shoes."
James: There's real emotional heft behind this. It's not just her sassing people. It's a great role. There's a reason she won an Oscar for it.
Helen: And then came another Soderbergh, *Ocean's Eleven*.
James: Which is great. But I can't get past the *Ocean's Twelve* thing. Every time I watch the movie it pulls me out of it and it upsets me. I like the purity of *Eleven*. It's not trying to be clever.
Becky: I completely agree. All of that meta stuff is just awful. But saying that, she is very good at playing Tess playing Julia Roberts in it.
Helen: *Ocean's Eleven* is interesting because she's just the object of affection. She's just the love interest, she's the prize, but she manages to make it feel like she's doing a lot more than that.
Nick: *Closer* is an interesting role for her. It's more gritty and psychological. But I don't love it as a film.
Helen: It's pushing her in a different direction. As is *Charlie Wilson's War*.
James: It hurts me to say that I don't love *Charlie Wilson's War* despite his royal highness, Aaron Sorkin, being behind it.
Becky: One that's on my list is *Secret In Their Eyes*, which I absolutely love. She is amazing in it. She's just wide-eyed and frantic and furious throughout the whole thing.
Helen: It's an incredible film.
Nick: I prefer the original Argentinian version. But she's still challenging herself with these big, meaty roles.
Helen: *Ticket To Paradise* reunited her with George Clooney. It's a big stupid film but I was delighted to see a mid-range romcom in the cinema. I had a lovely time.
Nick: It's comfort food, isn't it? A big old microwave meal.
Becky: It looks like the whole thing was shot on drones. It's the weirdest-looking film I've seen.
Helen: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

THE TOP TEN

1


ERIN BROCKOVICH (2000)
Helen: "It's the best role Roberts has ever played and the one that showcases her range better than any other. As Brockovich, she's all compassion one minute and fury the next."

2


PRETTY WOMAN (1990)
James: "Unassailable in the number-two spot. It proved the supernova event that put Roberts on the A-list."

3


STEEL MAGNOLIAS (1989)
Nick: "In a cast of legends, a 21-year-old Roberts blazes brightest of all. Title still confuses me, though."

4


MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING (1997)
Becky: "She may be a little villainous in this romcom classic, but its Roberts at her quintessential '90s best."

5


NOTTING HILL (1999)
James: "Fifth? *Fifth?!* I'm having none of this. Not only is this fried Curtis gold, but Roberts is dazzling in it."

6


MYSTIC PIZZA (1988)
Helen: "A fully formed star-turn at an early stage in Roberts' career. This is fiery and hugely fun."

7


OCEAN'S ELEVEN (2001)
James: "It's hard to deny that, as excellent as this film is, it's not a true showcase of Roberts' talents."

8


SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY (1991)
Nick: "A primal fear — being menaced by Patrick Bergin while in the bath — is brought to life in this fun thriller."

9


SECRET IN THEIR EYES (2015)
Becky: "Roberts is rough and raw in this taut thriller with a killer twist. One of her better recent efforts."

10

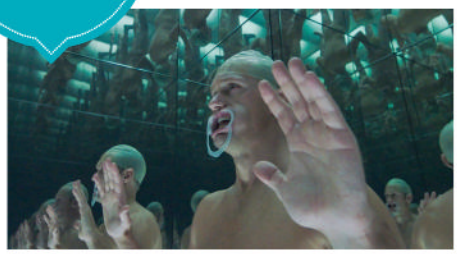

CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR (2007)
Helen: "Steelier than usual, Roberts shows enormous composure and wit as a realpolitik-focused socialite."

AGREE? DISAGREE? WRITE IN AND TELL US AT:
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6 OF THE BEST

Team *Empire* on the month's essential movies

PICK OF THE MONTH



INFINITY POOL

OUT **26 JUNE** / CERT **18** / **118 MINS**

DVD BR

Has Cronenberg out-Cronenberged Cronenberg? With *Infinity Pool*, director Brandon Cronenberg has made something so outrageous and wild that even his famously outrageous and wild father David might want to have a word. It broadly fits into the recent glut of 'eat the rich' satires, but this film's sensibilities are wackier and more savage than, say, *The Menu*. Alexander Skarsgård's holiday-gone-wrong features murder, orgies, breastfeeding, rudimentary cloning, full on-screen ejaculation — and the most outrageous, out-there Mia Goth horror performance since, well, her last one. This is body horror that's as much psychologically grotesque as it is physically. A pool worth dipping your toe into — at your own risk. **JOHN NUGENT**



LOLA

OUT **3 JULY** / CERT **15** / **83 MINS**

BR

A found-footage film set in the early 1940s, consisting of snippets of home cine, recorded-off-air primitive TV (there's an explanation) and newsreel. Left to their own devices in a rambling gothic house, sisters Mars (Stefanie Martini) and Tom (Emma Appleton) invent LOLA, a machine which pulls in radio and TV signals from the future. At first, they get acquainted with the pop music of decades hence — an astonishing sequence has Mars turn The Kinks' 'You Really Got Me' into a wartime nightclub sensation — but then reality fractures. Director Andrew Legge revels in time-twisting inventiveness and has a lot to say about the actual present day as he ponders how good intentions might muck up the past. **KIM NEWMAN**



THE FIVE DEVILS

OUT **26 JUNE** / CERT **15** / **118 MINS**

DVD BR

In director Léa Mysius' deliciously dark *The Five Devils*, young girl Vicky (Sally Dramé) develops a superpowered sense of smell. Almost obsessively attached to her mother Joanne (Adèle Exarchopoulos), she tries to recreate her scent — and causes chaos when the arrival of her aunt Julia (Swala Emati) drives a wedge between them. This is part supernatural sci-fi, part queer love story, part family drama, beautifully shot against stark, mountainous landscapes. The central pair give stunning performances, Exarchopoulos in particular as a woman suffocated by the trappings of domesticity, partaking in icy wild swimming to reconnect with her body. A satisfying slow-burn — with a karaoke scene for the ages. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**



65

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12** / **92 MINS**

DVD BR 4K

Somewhat buried upon its theatrical launch, the sophomore directing effort of hot writing team Scott Beck and Bryan Woods deserves to find an audience as it hits the sofaplexes. Perhaps it would have fared better had it been titled 'Adam Driver Vs Dinosaurs', as his tragedy-strafed space traveller is marooned with a young girl on a hostile world that turns out to be Earth, 65 million years ago. Which means the aliens are in fact dinosaurs, and that light in the sky just might be bad news for everyone. It's not as fun as you might expect, but Beck and Woods have traded in absurdity for tension, setting up genuinely suspenseful set-pieces, while their take on dinosaurs veers away from *Jurassic Park* and into nightmare-fuel territory. **CHRIS HEWITT**



THE LIGHTHOUSE

OUT **12 JUNE** / CERT **15** / **109 MINS**

DVD BR 4K

Sandwiched between his spooky debut (*The Witch*) and his big-budget epic (*The Northman*), Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* is still his most perfectly realised work, an exquisite testament to his aesthetic, his tone, his delightfully perverse funny bone. As much *Bottom* as it is Bergman, it locks us in a lighthouse with two equally batshit staffers — supposed straight man Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson, devouring the film's sticky claustrophobia) and Thomas Wake (Willem Dafoe, going full-beard and full lunacy). It's a raucous chunk of madness, reeking of sweat, beer and bodily fluids, and this new 4K transfer perfectly highlights Jarin Blaschke's gorgeous black-and-white cinematography. Drink it up. **ALEX GODFREY**



MARCEL THE SHELL WITH SHOES ON

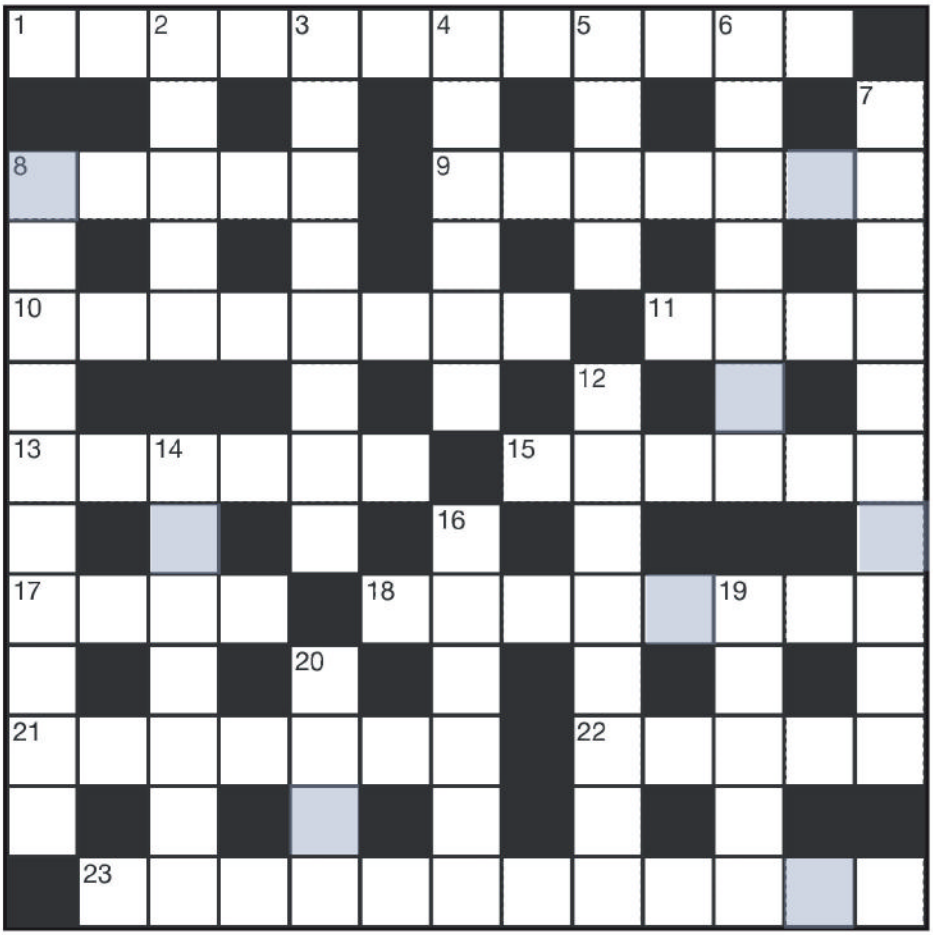
OUT **26 JUNE** / CERT **PG** / **90 MINS**

DVD BR

The greatest trick Marcel The Shell ever pulled was convincing the world he was a walking, talking, anxiety-prone adventurer, rather than an inanimate casing of calcium carbonate. Because the character of Marcel himself (voiced freewheelingly by Jenny Slate) is so disarming — and his story of trying to reunite with his lost shell-family while caring for elderly Nana Connie (Isabella Rossellini) so emotional — that you probably won't even question the complexity of shooting a handheld, documentary-style film whose main character is a stop-motion creation. The whimsy inherent in Dean Fleischer Camp's feature-length adaptation of his own internet shorts could easily be fatal; instead, the results are low-key life-affirming. **BEN TRAVIS**

Landmark

CROSSWORD AND COMPETITION



ACROSS

1 Director of *Red Road*, *Fish Tank* and *American Honey* (6,6)
8 Apparatus in which a movie camera is mounted on the end of a boom (5)
9 Hal, who brought us *The Unbelievable Truth* (7)
10 "The future begins" declared this sci-fi adventure's tagline (4,4)
11 Moreno or Hayworth or Tushingham (4)
13 Robert, *Big* business owner and *Independence Day* general (6)
15 *Titanic* composer James (6)
17 *The Desert* — (Richard Burton film) (4)
18 Where Terry Gilliam got lost when trying to adapt *Don Quixote* (2,6)
21 Rob Marshall's Best Picture Oscar-winner (7)
22 The real first name of 23 Across' Dr Jones (5)
23 Only actor to play Jack Ryan in more than one film (8,4)

DOWN

2 Princess of Themyscira (5)
3 — *Dreams* (Virginia Madsen) (8)
4 Could be Judd, could be Walters (6)
5 Jason Patric-Ray Liotta thriller from Joe Carnahan (4)
6 Gish, silent-movie actress and the sister of Dorothy (7)
7 Film that features the song 'Wouldn't It Be Loverly?' (2,4,4)
8 Fictional horror location that gave its name to Rob Reiner's production company (6,4)
12 Pryce, who's been Pope and President (8)
14 Dark chiller with Halle Berry and Robert Downey Jr (7)
16 Cameron Crowe's almost this (6)
19 Action-adventure based on a Michael Crichton novel (5)
20 Miloš Forman musical (4)

WIN!

HIVEX FREESTYLE HOME PROJECTOR



Attention all who want to turn their living room into a bona fide home cinema — because this issue we have a rather stylish Hivex Freestyle projector (RRP £249.99) to give away to one reader — all you need to supersize your movie and box-set-viewing in the comfort of your own home. Not only that, the Freestyle boasts Premium 360 sound, plus built-in Netflix, Prime Video, Disney+ and more for easy access — all connected via WiFi, Bluetooth and screen mirroring. Fancy getting your hands on it? If so, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and then follow the entry details below. Good luck!

THE HIVEX FREESTYLE IS AVAILABLE TO BUY AT SHOPHIVEX.COM

COMPETITION ENDS 3 JULY

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 3 July. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

SUMMER ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Gamora, **4** Scott, **9** Inception, **10** Air, **11** Leaf, **12** Peter Pan, **14** Flash, **15** Blimp, **20** Wrestler, **22** Pris, **24** CGI, **25** Australia, **26** Wyler **27** Bosses. **DOWN: 1** Ghibli, **2** Michael, **3** Rope, **5** Connelly, **6** Tramp, **7** Miles, **8** Crank, **13** Is It Safe?, **16** Morales, **17** Twice, **18** Beast, **19** Oscars, **21** Emily, **23** Argo. **ANAGRAM** Nick Fury

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 4 July or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. One winner will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winner a maximum of three times. If the winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html



CLASSIC SCENE

Standout sequences from the great movies

The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre

Chosen by SAM RAIMI

Sam Raimi: "There's a great shot I remember seeing as a kid on an old black-and-white TV. Humphrey Bogart wins the lottery, money comes his way, and he decides with Tim Holt and Walter Huston to go out prospecting. There's a shot where they agree to it, at the height of their friendship, and they shake hands. John Huston just slowly moves in on that handshake. Because it's a story of how greed can destroy, that handshake has intense significance for me. What a great moment to mark with that subtle camera move."

INT. BAR — DAY

Fred C. Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart) is in a bar with Bob Curtin (Tim Holt) and an old man, Howard (Walter Huston), is talking to them about gold prospecting. He's just told them they need more money to make an expedition happen, when a young Mexican boy (Robert Blake) approaches Dobbs.

BOY: *Señor*! *Señor*! Give me my money, *señor*! Ten per cent I get for selling you the winning ticket!

DOBBS: Get away from me, will ya?

BOY: Oh, please, *señor*. Whoever draws the lucky number always gives a present to the seller of the tick-

DOBBS: I tell you, I don't want any lottery ticket!

BOY: If you don't, you have bad luck the rest of your life.

DOBBS: Wait a minute. What'd you first say?

HOWARD: Well he's trying to tell you he sold you the winning ticket.

DOBBS: (*Standing up, rooting through his pocket*) Hey, hey, wait a minute. This what you mean?

He produces a ticket.

BOY: *Si*, *señor*.

DOBBS: You say it's a winner?

BOY: *Si*. A 200 *peso* prize.

Curtin looks at the boy's lottery paper.

CURTIN: Where?

BOY: *Tres*. *Siete*. *Dos*. *Uno*.

DOBBS: Hey, that's my number!

CURTIN: Sure enough!

DOBBS: Oh, just look at that fat, rich, printed number. That's the kind of sugar Poppa likes. Oh, 200 *pesos*. Welcome, sweet little smackaroos. Here, son. (*He gives some cash to the boy*) Here's a present for you, with my blessing.

BOY: *Muchas gracias*, *señor*!

Dobbs looks at Curtin.

DOBBS: Well, would you like to shake the hand that bought that ticket?

CURTIN: Congratulations.

DOBBS: Congratulations yourself. You stand to profit out of this the same as I do.

CURTIN: How do you make that out?

DOBBS: Well, didn't he just say we needed 600 bucks? Well, that's what we got now, ain't it?

CURTIN: Yeah, but-

DOBBS: But what?

CURTIN: Well, how come you're putting up for me?

DOBBS: Well, this is an all-or-nothing proposition, ain't it? If we make a find, we'll be lighting our cigars with $100 bills. If we don't, the difference between what you put up and what I put up ain't enough to keep me from being right back where I was this afternoon — polishing a bench with the seat of my pants.

Dobbs extends his hand.

DOBBS: Put her there, pard.

As Curtin accepts Dobbs' hand, music swells and the camera pushes in. Howard looks up at his new colleagues, while they continue to shake hands, cementing their new enterprise.



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ORIGINAL SERIES

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